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# TUNISIAN YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHORITARIAN RESTORATION: WITHERING SUPPORT TO DEMOCRACY

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In Partnership With



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## Executive Summary

Tunisia's democratic transition was buried by Kais Saied's coup d'état on 25 July 2021, and the subsequent dismantling of the entire institutional edifice built since the revolution. After a decade of living under a democratic regime and learning about democracy in theory and practice, how do young people perceive the evolution of their political institutions and procedures in a process of autocratization?

To answer this question, the Arab Reform Initiative, in collaboration with its partner organizations, Génération Anti-Marginalization and We Start, conducted in 2023 a series of six focus group discussions with young people aged 18-35. The focus groups, which gathered 41 participants, were organized across two distinct locations: Kairouan and Kabaria. The focus group discussions sought to elicit from participants their perceptions of the political changes since July 2021, their main priorities, and what they perceived as the critical pathway for inclusive participation and greater social justice.

### **Youth in public life today: Political apathy persists.**

Two years after Saied's coup, the State is still struggling to achieve economic stability, security, and safety. Meanwhile, Saied continues to dismantle the achievements of the democratic transition. The current situation is perceived as a relative letdown for Tunisian youth who supported Saied since 2019, putting their faith in his anti-establishment and youth empowerment discourses. The lack of change coupled with the return to authoritarian tendencies has translated into youth growing disillusioned with Saied's vision and the political sphere in general.

**Values and expectations show a shift from collective to individual interests.** Youth consider values like awareness and responsibility essential in the Tunisian public sphere. However, they presented these values with an individualistic rather than a collective focus: lack of awareness and responsibility is the problem, and each individual should be an aware and responsible citizen and it is from the addition of everyone's efforts that change will come. This testifies to the growing skepticism of young people toward the very idea of finding collective alternatives and solutions to the current predicament: the collective sphere is too unstable, too unpredictable to be invested with values, time, and effort, whereas the individual can still be invested, located, and evaluated. In a sense, this individualistic framing illustrates the political space's closure, which is no longer a space to be invested with values. Now, it is the addition of individual efforts that is seen as the way out of Tunisia's multidimensional crisis.

### **Perception of recent events: Initially, youth perceived Kais Saied's power grab as a fresh start for Tunisia, but not anymore.**

As time passed, Saied's appeal waned among them, as their calls for "Freedom, justice, and dignity" remained unfulfilled. They did not perceive a distinct shift in areas where they saw him as capable of bringing change, particularly in politics, the economy, and the justice system. Instead, they witnessed the presence of the same problems they had criticized during the democratic transition: lack of vision and a clear preference for institutional rather than economic change. But as support wanes, the absence of alternatives that meet their demands creates a vacuum that Saied continues to fill by giving hope that the demands for the moralization of politics are being answered by his authoritarian moves against opponents.

### **Perceptions of the past decade: Despite its abuses, a sense of nostalgia for the Ben Ali regime is growing among both Millennials and Generation Z.**

On the one hand, this nostalgia represents an idealized view of the past, embodying a longing for values that seem absent in their current reality, such as international prestige, economic stability, and security. On the other hand, the image of the former regime in their personal and collective memory remains mixed and ambiguous as many are aware of how violent the regime was.

### **Perceptions of development and public services: Public services are "out of service" while development seems stuck.**

In sectors like healthcare, transportation, and education, there is a consensus among youth that the quality of services is deteriorating in the capital and, more critically, in other parts of the country. The inadequacies of public services are not without consequences for the well-being of young people who are unable to carry out basic day-to-day tasks due to the state of these services, leading to a state of helplessness and despair. As the country's development horizon remains at a standstill, migration is one of the few remaining options for youth seeking better living conditions.

## Introduction

In 2021, the Arab Reform Initiative undertook a major research project seeking to understand Tunisian youth's relationship to the democratic transition: how they were socialized into democracy, how they understand democracy and its value to their own lives, and how they evaluate their new democratic institutions and representatives. This research culminated in the publication of the report "Youth Perceptions of Politics in the post-2011 Tunisia: Giving the Floor to Millennials and Gen Z". In this first phase, conducted in the first half of 2021, that is, a few months before the 25 July coup, we explored youth's understanding of democratic principles, their views on politics, and their values. Our main hypothesis was that youth is not a homogeneous group as generational differences matter in the Tunisian context: Generation Y "made" the revolution, while Generation Z grew up to be adults during a democratic transition. This meant that the former were socialized into democracy in a more informal, activist way than the latter who grew up in a context where democracy was publicly endorsed as a key aspect of Tunisia's future. Our hypothesis was that this difference in democratic socialization would translate into different conceptualizations of democracy, political life, political values, etc.

However, our initial findings showed that young people, regardless of their age, were very similar in terms of what values were important to them and how they viewed the political context. Regardless of age, they agreed that moralizing the political sphere was a priority, and thus shared Kais Saied's rejection of the political class and, in particular, parliament. However, this rejection of parliament and parties did not imply a rejection of the democratic edifice per se, which was seen as a positive development for the country. The only notable difference was, unsurprisingly, that

Moreover, when it came to defining themselves, we found that young people from each generation didn't perceive much of a gap with people from the other generation, but they did make it clear that they didn't feel represented by some young people, especially those from urban areas, whether from the middle or upper classes or more popular backgrounds. These efforts to distinguish themselves from other young people showed us that 'youth' as an all-encompassing category does not do justice to the way young people see themselves, and that we need to segment this category, just as they make efforts to distinguish themselves from their peers.

Since the end of this first phase, the country has changed dramatically. The democratic transition was buried by the coup d'état led by Kais Saied on 25 July 2021. With this coup, the entire institutional edifice that had been built since the revolution was gradually dismantled. This new

phase led us to wonder how young people's perceptions of political institutions are evolving in the face of the current autocratization, after a decade of living under a democratic regime.

To answer this question, the Arab Reform Initiative, in collaboration with its partner organizations *Génération Anti-Marginalisation* and *We Start*, conducted a series of six focus group discussions with young people aged 18-35 in 2023. The focus groups, which gathered 41 participants and reflected gender parity, were organized in four different locations: Kairouan city, Chebika, Hajeb Laayoune, and Kabaria. The focus group discussions sought to find out from participants how they perceived political change since July 2021, what their main priorities were, and what they saw as the critical path to inclusive participation and greater social justice.

The methodology of this research focused on the heterogeneity of young people and how their location in geographies of inequality, historical marginalization, and social stigma influences their political attitudes, behaviors, and values. To what extent do the inequalities between young people resulting from the geographical patterns of social injustice influence their own self-definition, their perceptions of the public sphere and the political scene, and their views or opinions on politics and the de-transition process? Similarly, the research methodology sought to assess the extent to which micro-generational differences between young people influence differences in perceptions and understandings. To this end, we decided to mix the ages within the same focus groups in order to hear the differences between them first hand and to analyze the reactions these differences evoke between the two generations we are studying, Generation Y and Generation Z. This proved particularly fruitful when it came to questions of memory.

In the spirit of iteration, the research participants selected in the governorate of Kairouan were virtually the same as those interviewed in 2021, in order to measure the evolution of their positions in this profoundly changed context. We asked similar questions to those they answered in the first iteration of the research, but we also added new questions about how they saw themselves as young, not only in terms of generation (distinguishing between Generation Z and Generation Y) but also in terms of geography. For example, we asked young people how they saw themselves as individuals in their city or neighborhood, and how they saw themselves as a group, i.e. "the youth of (the city or neighborhood we were in)", and how they thought they were perceived by the rest of the governorate and the rest of the country.

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We also conducted part of our research in a working-class suburb of the capital. Indeed, our initial research in 2021 showed that the young people we interviewed from the interior regions did not see themselves as belonging to the youth of the big cities, and even less so to the youth of the working-class suburbs. This lack of cohesion within the same age group and the efforts made by these young people to distinguish themselves from these “other” young people, whom they consider to be illegitimate or violent, led us to question this category of “youth” as a whole. We realized that the young people’s efforts to distinguish themselves from other young people had to be translated into a more segmented approach on our part. Here we recall a comment made by a former member of parliament during our policy dialogue on youth participation in politics: “Why is it that when it comes to women and young people, actors who promote their participation or in-group alliance think that their political identities can be erased by belonging to a certain gender or age group? She was thinking of the networking and team-building sessions funded by foreign donors where young or female MPs from different political parties are invited to meet and network, but the same idea can be applied to the study of youth: why should belonging to the same age category mean similar views on politics?”

In this report, we take account of the effort to demarcate what we have noted and insist on exploring young people’s perceptions of themselves, their image, and that of other young people. In addition, we mobilize the concept of ‘political ecology’ in our analysis: the idea that people are shaped by their environment, by the resources they have and those they lack. We believe that inequalities prevent youth from becoming a class-in-itself, with their own political interests and demands.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Tunisia, our understanding of political ecology has everything to do with regional inequalities, which more broadly translate into class inequalities. We see these as the main drivers of youth differentiation and segmentation.

Our findings were numerous and, in some cases, surprising. One important finding is that Kais Saied’s move against the parliament was indeed popular among young people. This was in line with our initial findings, which showed that youth shared his rejection of this institution and the political parties it represented. However, his popularity gradually waned as young people did not see a clear break in the policy areas where they expected him to bring change, namely the moralization of the political scene, the economy, and the judiciary. His re-autocratization of Tunisia was not the main reason for his waning popularity, but it was seen by some as a serious threat. The re-autocratization of Tunisia that he presided over was not the main reason for his waning popularity, although it was cited by some as a major threat. It is his failure to deliver on key aspects of life, namely economy and justice,

that has begun to erode his popularity among the youth. One could say that he is making the same mistake as the political elites of 2011: responding to people’s urgent economic and social demands with institutional and constitutional changes.

Another important finding that follows from this first one is that we found a remarkable nostalgia for the Ben Ali regime, especially among Generation Z. Despite the appalling human rights violations and the endemic plundering of the Tunisian economy, what remains of that regime can be summed up in two expressions/slogans: “Amn wa Amen” (Security and Safety) and “With 10 dinars you’d fill your shopping bag”. This suggests that the collective memory of the dictatorship has not been transmitted to the younger generations in a compelling way.

Finally, in terms of values, we noted a clear shift towards the individualization of both problems and solutions. Indeed, when asked which values were most important to promote in the collective sphere, the majority of young people answered “responsibility” and “awareness”, defining these values in individualistic terms, i.e. if each person were more “responsible” and “aware”, Tunisia would be in a better state. The burden of the collective situation was placed on the addition of individual lack of responsibility and awareness. This leads us to believe that one of the consequences of the coup is the weakening of the collective sphere. The collective is no longer a space to invest in values; individuals are to be invested in, and supposedly, if everyone does their part, the addition will bring Tunisia a better future.

# Qualifying Youth Political Participation and Mobilization

## ***Youth Political Participation in Tunisia after 2011***

The democratization that Tunisia has experienced since 2011 has raised hopes of a radical change in the place of young people in the country, particularly in terms of political representation. However, ten years after the uprising, research on youth political participation concludes that young people have been and continue to be excluded from the traditional political landscape, i.e. from political parties.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, young people's levels of trust and interest in the political system are very low. According to a survey commissioned by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in 2018, 47% of Tunisian youth are not at all interested in political life and local affairs.<sup>3</sup> The World Bank, on the other hand, presented very low figures for trust in the political system among Tunisian youth: only 8.8% of rural youth and 31.1% of urban youth trust the political system.

However, this double movement of exclusion-indifference/lack of trust between young people and the formal political landscape does not mean that they have left it altogether. As in many countries around the world, young people can be found elsewhere. Important social movements have been led by young people. We are thinking here of movements such as Manich Msemah (I will not forgive),<sup>4</sup> which protested against an amnesty law that whitewashed official and business actors involved in the mass expropriation of public assets by the previous regime. The 2011 revolution also saw a clear generational renewal in the feminist movement. Aided by social media, young women created spaces to share their intimate experiences and create alternative narratives to the state-sponsored one that had been more or less endorsed by feminists who had first mobilized against the same narrative in the 1980s, due to the fear generated by Islamists in the early 1990s. Young millennial women were at the forefront of campaigns against sexual harassment (EnaZeda) and femicide. In addition, the revolution paved the way for LGBTQ+ movements, most of which are led by young people. The LGBTQ+ movement has gradually become more visible in social movement spaces over the last decade. Young people's political participation has not disappeared so much as it has been hybridized, culturalized, and focused on alternative forms and spaces of engagement.<sup>5</sup>

However, these instances of participation outside the formal political realm need to be put into context: they often involve NGOs that are driven by foreign funds, or people who work in or around NGOs driven by foreign funds and are mostly Tunis-centric. Involvement in civil society is moreover a classed and geographically limited experience: most activists are multilingual, urban, university-educated young people. In contrast, only 3% of young Tunisians living in rural areas are involved in CSOs according to the World Bank 2014 survey. Additionally, this involvement in other forms of political participation does not act as a bridge with formal political participation: According to Mansouri,<sup>6</sup> a very small proportion of the cohort (around 10%) he surveyed indicated that they are likely to see themselves taking an active role in political leadership through membership of political parties. This finding was echoed by feelings of powerlessness and lack of agency, despite participation in civil society.

In this context, the election of Kais Saied in November 2019 and the central role youth played in his campaign<sup>7</sup> came as a big disruption to the widely accepted narrative of youth's exclusion and indifference from formal politics. Young people were at the forefront of his campaign and, according to polls, massively voted for him since the first round<sup>8</sup> (37% of youth aged between 18 and 25 voted for Saied in the first round of the 2019 presidential elections according to Sigma Conseil).

## ***Youth Political Participation since 25 July 2021***

Despite youth's crucial role in Saied election in 2019, no progress has been made in terms of youth inclusion in formal politics, quite the contrary. Since the 25 July coup, the very little progress that has been made in this policy area has been halted and reversed. What we are witnessing today is a clear return to point zero when it comes to youth political participation.

While young people were crucial to his election, few young people are leading the new regime, either in the government or in the various commissions he has set up or even in the media where Saied supporters "explain" his project. In terms of optics, what we are seeing is not very different from what we have seen during the democratic

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decade: middle-aged men are at the center of the stage while young people, except for maybe one person,<sup>9</sup> are nowhere to be found.

In legal terms, the new constitution raised the age of eligibility for the presidency from 35 to 40. In addition, the new electoral law simply abolishes all the quotas and parity requirements or incentives for candidacy that were introduced after the revolution. As candidacies for legislative elections are now individual, quotas were set for the sponsorship of candidates (parity between men and women, and 25% of sponsors must be young people). However, this does nothing to encourage diversity of candidates: as long as they have the necessary signatures, old men with resources are free to run as many as they like. There is no formal mechanism to encourage women and young people to stand. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of new MPs are older men: Men over the age of 45 make up around 39% of MPs. They are twice as many as the total number of women in the 2022 parliament. MPs under 40 make up only 22% of the contingent.<sup>10</sup>

Parliamentary session / Age	# 21-30 years old	# 31-40 years old	% 21-30 yers old / TOTAL	% 31-40 years old / TOTAL
2014-2019	14	35	6,45%	16,12%
2019-2021	15	43	6,91%	19,81%
2022-2027	8	26	4,96%	16,14%

Finally, youth participation in the elections, which was already not very high, has declined significantly. Although the e-estichara<sup>11</sup> was open to young people aged 16 and over, turnout was low: only 2% of participants were aged between 16 and 19. The 20-29 age group accounted for 16.9% of voters. Only those aged between 30 and 39 were over-represented in relation to their demographic weight in the country, with 25.59% of the total number of participants.<sup>12</sup> The same abstention pattern was observed during the July 2022 referendum and the December 2022-January 2023 parliamentary elections. In the first round, only 5.8% of young people aged between 18 and 25 and 26.7% of those aged between 26 and 45 voted, according to the ISIE.<sup>13</sup>

This shows that despite the initial support from youth for Kais Saied's promises in 2019, there has been no significant improvement in their inclusion or active participation in politics. Young people have not won more seats nor have

they voted more since his power grab. So, what's in it for young people here? Our previous findings showed that the convergence between Saied and young people had to do with the endorsement of similar values (integrity, morality, etc.) and a common rejection of the political establishment and the institution that symbolized it most, the parliament. Our current research will show that in both these areas, Saied is disappointing. Yet, as support wanes, the absence of alternatives that meet these same demands creates a vacuum that Saied continues to fill by giving hope that the demands for the moralization of politics will be met by his authoritarian moves against opponents.

## Conceptualizing Inequalities' Impact on Political Opinions

### *The Geographies of Injustice*

Two concepts are key to understanding differences among youth in Tunisia: political ecology on the one hand, and the eclipse of the concept of social class on the other hand. We came to these two concepts as we understood that given the history of regional inequality in Tunisia,<sup>14</sup> youth could not be understood as one coherent group. The concept of political ecology "highlights the importance of exploring the interrelationship between environment and politics."<sup>15</sup> Many studies on youth's political participation focus on primary and secondary socialization,<sup>16</sup> 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 common plight" as youth. Inequalities thus prevent youth from becoming a class-in-itself, with its own political interests and demands.<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup>*

This approach has been supported by our past findings which showed that young people in interior regions did not identify with young people in big coastal cities.

Moreover, the choice of a geographical approach was reinforced when reading the book *Quand les jeunes parlent d'injustice: Expériences, registres, mots en Tunisie*, edited by sociologists Hayet Moussa and Imed Melliti in 2018.<sup>19</sup> Taking up 2011 as an important moment for the expression of injustice in Tunisia, the book's various contributions show that geography is at the heart of the framing of injustice. "Injustice begins with being-here, being-born-here, with location"<sup>20</sup> write Melliti and Moussa.

This identification with the marginalized space or region can even, according to them, go beyond the strictly economic data of individuals: "Belong[ing] to the center or the periphery, to the rural or urban environment, to the coastal or inland regions."<sup>21</sup> surpasses individual wealth when it comes to self-definition. Identifying with a marginalized region can therefore sometimes go so far as to blur social class belonging in the way individuals tell their stories. However, they nuance this observation, since phenomena of distinction or internal discrimination can appear even within a marginalized region and sometimes take over narratives of regional discrimination. For instance, in the case of Kairouan, the categories of "beldi" (urban bourgeois) and "riffi" (rural) matter just as much as the collective belonging to what is seen as an impoverished region. In the specific case of Kairouan, it is symbolized by expressions of contempt for people using *gué* rather than *qaf* when they speak, the former being seen as specific to rural people while the latter is what makes someone a civilized urban citizen. These categories are nationalized (you'll very rarely hear someone speaking *Gué* on the radio or television, but you'll hear jokes about speaking *Gué* far more often), but in certain regions like Kairouan, they can take on a dimension more central than that of equality between people from a marginalized region.

It is around this dimension of territorial injustice that feelings of scorn and non-recognition are formed. However, it should be remembered that when it comes to defining injustice and social exclusion in Tunisia today, the geographical (or spatial) approach we have adopted is interwoven with other dimensions: the political dimension, the media dimension, and the intergenerational dimension.<sup>22</sup> The political dimension was the focus of our other research on youth in Tunisia, through which we assessed the impact of youth quotas in municipal councils elected in 2018. The media and intergenerational dimensions will be among the focuses of the present paper.

## ***The Fading Significance of Social Class Expressions/ Language***

Melliti and Moussa note that the young people with whom their research team spoke, barely have a sense of belonging to a class. Thus, their identity lacked a collective, shared, narrative. This indicates that belonging lies elsewhere. Most often, it's geographical. This inability of class to create an identity among young people is a remarkable fact. They note that only two of their interviewees spontaneously identify with the "Zaweli"<sup>23</sup> (poor) category. Young people define themselves "by social comparison: [...] not by what they are, but in relation to others: adults, elders, young people from other socio-economic categories and other regions". This reflex of comparison can be coupled with the phenomena of distinction between young people mentioned in the introduction.

This eclipse of the idiom of social class leaves room for two things: the discourse of moral economy, dominated by "the moral scandal of discrimination and deprivation of rights". This idiom is individual and "focuses on the individual and his or her right to have access to a "normal way of life" or to be considered as such". Thus, "social demands are formulated much less around a demand for equality than in the moral repertoire of respect and dignity".<sup>24</sup> In addition to moral economy, there are more general moral discourses in which responsibility for failure or marginality is placed on the shoulders of the individual (laziness, lack of willpower, etc.). This shaped the way we framed our questions: what is expected of the state, how young people see themselves, and their future. It also helped us to contextualize the prevalence of values centered on the individual rather than the collective, which we discuss later in the paper.

## **Methodology**

### ***The Focus Groups***

In collaboration with its partner organizations (Génération Anti-Marginalization and WeStart), the ARI team conducted a series of six focus groups which gathered 41 participants. They were organized across two distinct locations: Kairouan Governorate and Kabaria neighborhood. In Kairouan, our team facilitated discussions in three different areas: Kairouan City, Chebika, and Hajeb Laayoune. Similarly, in Kabaria, we engaged participants residing in the surrounding neighborhoods.

In addition to the initial targets of the first ARI-Porticus Youth project (2021-2022), the current research focus emphasized generational differences by including Generation Y and Generation Z in the same focus group. We see Gen Y (or Millennials) and Gen Z (or Zoomers) as two different generations who, theoretically, have radically different political experiences as the former grew up under the Ben Ali regime while the other grew up in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. It also included

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geographical disparities, specifically between peri-urban and rural areas. The two regions, Kairouan and Kabaria, have often seen youth facing marginalization, with limited political participation throughout the past decade.

The focus groups lasted between 2 and 4 hours, with one part of the team facilitating the discussions and interacting with the participants, while the other part transcribed the interviews. At the beginning of each focus group, each participant was asked to fill in a socio-demographic form containing necessary information such as age, gender, employment status, education level, urban/rural residence, affiliation to a political party or NGO, and previous electoral participation. The forms collected were anonymous and coded. The focus groups were recorded unless the speakers refused to be recorded. Informed consent was systematically obtained before the focus group discussions and the data was subsequently stored on secure servers.

Efforts were made to ensure a consistent distribution of participants by age and gender within each group. Consideration was also given to participants' socio-economic status and level of education in order to make the groups as qualitatively representative as possible of young people in each location and to ensure the widest possible range of views.

All six focus groups were structured around a standard questionnaire developed from the literature review and contextual analysis carried out at the beginning of the project. As Tunisia continued its democratic "de-transition", new questions were added to reflect the country's evolving context. At the same time, some questions remained the same as in the first edition of the project.

It is crucial to understand how young people view the political changes since July 2021, what their main priorities are, and what they see as the critical pathways to inclusive participation and greater social justice. To do this, we adopted a participatory approach, using each focus group to collect data. Each session was based on a set of questions focusing on different themes:

- Youth and public life
- Values and expectations
- Understanding the perception of the past decade's stages and recent political events
- Socialisation and participation
- Perception of the economic and professional environment

The participants listened to the questions and wrote their answers on the questionnaire before we opened the discussion for further elaboration. Some questions used the vignette method to spark debate over the group. Afterward, our team inductively coded the data using keywords and analyzed the collected data by looking for relevant differences between locations, gender, and age, in order to identify converging and diverging viewpoints on Tunisia's social and political landscape among young people. The analysis findings are presented in the following report.

## The Participants

### - Age

The participants consisted of diverse youth from various age groups in each location. Some were from Generation Y, who witnessed the 2011 revolution, and those from Generation Z, who came of age in the post-revolutionary period.

	Kairouan Centre		Chebika		Hajeb Laayoune		Kabarria	
Distribution according to age	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)
18-26	5	62.5	6	75	3	37.5	7	58.8
27-36	3	37.5	2	25	5	62.5	10	41.2

### - Gender

For Gender, the distribution within each region exhibited slight variations:

	Kairouan Centre		Chebika		Hajeb Laayoune		Kabarria	
Distribution according to gender	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)
Male	4	50	6	75	3	37.5	10	58.8
Female	4	50	2	25	5	62.5	7	41.2

### - Level of education

For the level of education, each region exhibited slight variations:

	Kairouan Centre		Chebika		Hajeb Laayoune		Kabarria	
Distribution according to educational level	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)	N <sub>e</sub>	(%)
School dropout	0	0	1	12.5	0	0	4	23.5
High school	2	25	1	12.5	1	12.5	5	29.4
University	6	75	6	75	7	87.5	8	47.1

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### - Employment status

Each region presented a range of participants with various employment status.

Distribution according to the employment status	Kairouan Centre		Chebika		Hajeb Laayoune		Kabaria	
	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)
<b>Students</b>	2	25	3	37.5	5	62.5	9	52.9
<b>Daily worker</b>	0	0	1	12.5	1	12.5	3	17.6
<b>Employee</b>	5	62.5	1	12.5	1	12.5	2	11.8
<b>Unemployed</b>	1	12.5	3	37.5	1	12.5	3	17.7

### - NGO participation

Each region presented a range of participants where some of them were involved in NGOs while others were not.

Are you /Have you been part of an NGO?	Kairouan Centre		Chebika		Hajeb Laayoune		Kabaria	
	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)
<b>Yes</b>	5	62.5	6	75	8	100	12	70.6
<b>No</b>	3	37.5	2	25	0	0	5	29.4

Based on the data, 31 out of the 41 focus group participants have experience with civil society organizations. The young individuals we interviewed do not provide a complete representation of either their local peers or the broader Tunisian youth. This data highlights a research bias, as most Tunisian youth are not as involved in civil society as the individuals we interacted with.

### - Political party affiliation

Are you/Have you been affiliated with a political party ?	Kairouan Centre		Chebika		Hajeb Laayoune		Kabaria	
	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)	Nº	(%)
<b>Yes</b>	2	25	0	0	0	0	1	5.8
<b>No</b>	6	75	8	100	8	100	16	94

# Perceptions of Self, Community, and Generation

## Narratives of Generation

### The Current Generations

We began all six focus groups with the same question: How can participants describe their generation using an object, concept, or cultural phenomenon? This question aimed to gain insight into how the participants perceived themselves, their generation, and their peers. Understanding their views within a collective framework provided the basis for further analysis.

The participants from Kabaria and Kairouan are not a homogeneous group. However, it is important to recognize that their diversity stems from a common situation in which layers of inequality are intertwined. There were similarities in how they described their respective generations. They referred to themselves as the generation of the revolution and the generation of unemployment.

### The Generation of the Revolution

Both groups identified the revolution as a pivotal event that significantly influenced their understanding of their environment and political inclinations. It remains a powerful example of the reinvigoration of collective action, political mobilization, and solidarity, generating new strengths and capacities for politics. However, it was also perceived as the beginning of an unstable period that had negative consequences for the young generation.

*90s generation, the revolution generation, we had everything at the same time; we saw everything and deepened our understanding of politics, which we were not interested in before. Also, about the revolution, there is Harqa and unemployment.*  
(Female, 23, Chebika)

*The revolution is a landmark event. People's lives have changed due to the revolution regarding art, health, and day-to-day life. Personally, there was one life system before the revolution, and then there was another one even in your travels, cultural life, and habits. The revolution significantly*

*impacted me, with both positive and negative consequences. (Female, 29, Kabaria)*

The Millennials' first-hand experience of the previous regime and their direct involvement in the revolution illustrate the importance of such an event. It provided alternative avenues for political participation and socialization. The same is true for Zoomers, as the post-revolution period has fostered an expanded understanding of their rights and underscored the importance of active engagement in civic life. Nevertheless, some remain skeptical about civil society and NGO work, reflecting their dissatisfaction with the broader political context.

*I am part of GAM. I am here because the people here are similar to me; we have the same goal; we want to change and push the neighborhood forward; I refused to join another association because their background was unclear. There is always good and evil. Some people join organizations to have positions. (Female, 20, Kabaria)*

### The Generation of Unemployment and Marginalization

Testimonies such as “*It is a boxer generation, still hitting, but hitting a wall*” (Male, 35, Hajeb Laayoune) and “*the marginalized generation*” (Female, 20, Kabaria) vividly depict the prevailing sentiment of frustration and discouragement young individuals are still experiencing post-revolution. Youth from both generations continue to encounter obstacles in navigating their education and the transition into the workforce. However, this sentiment is particularly pronounced among Millennials, who have endured a more extended period of unemployment than Generation Z. An issue particularly acute in the interior and south of Tunisia, the cradle of the 2011 revolution. Between October 2021 and January 2022, the highest unemployment rates are observed in the western and southern regions of Tunisia (North-West 33%, South-West 26.3%, Center-West 23%).<sup>25</sup>

*A generation that lacks development, that lacks occupations. It feels as if I am living in another world. The state works for the old. For us, people are leaving every day. The south has been emptied of its young people. Before, they lived without responsibilities. Now, my responsibility is greater than my age. I have the responsibilities of a 50-year-old guy who has got nothing but trouble. At 27, I dream and see things, but I am not reaching them. I cannot find the word to say all that. (Male, 27, Kabaria)*

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Another excluded group of Tunisian youth is the NEETs, referring to young people, not in education, employment, or training. The country exhibits one of the most elevated NEET rates in the Middle East and North Africa region, reaching 33 percent in 2020.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the state continues to show little concern in supporting this vulnerable group to transition from the educational to the professional realm.

*I am going to talk about something occurring in my family which is unemployment. You graduate and “tched blastek” (“stay in your lane”) in the house. Everyone in the house has a minimum of five or six years of studies. I finished my diploma in 2016, and now I decided to do something else, because I spent six years, six good years, unemployed, so I decided to study again. (Female, 32, Hajeb Laayoune)*

### **The Preceding Generation**

An alternative version of the initial question was asked to the participants: How would they describe their parents’ generation in a single word? The responses diverged, with some expressing nostalgia and reverence, viewing their parents as the golden generation. Conversely, others heavily criticized this generation, citing their perceived naivety and irresponsibility.

As an entire generation is trapped in “waithood,”<sup>27</sup> some participants look back fondly to the previous era as a time of “*stability, security, and rest.*” (Female, 29, Hajeb Laayoune). They were expressing a sense of longing for a time they did not personally experience, perceiving it as a symbol of unity and economic prosperity. Another participant went as far as to describe her parents’ generation as “*the generation of goodness.*” (Female, 22, Kabaria).

The yearning for the past is not exclusive to Tunisian youth. It has been observed in transitioning and established democracies.<sup>28</sup> Individuals would be experiencing “socio-temporal yearning for a different stage or quality of life”, mainly youth, and “a desire to recapture what life was at that time, whether innocent, euphoric, secure, intelligible.”<sup>29</sup>

The prevailing circumstances in Tunisia, including high unemployment rates, severe economic adversities, corruption, the resurgence of authoritarianism, and an ecological crisis, encourage this feeling. Participants are not expressing a literal desire to return to the previous authoritarian regime per se but more of a return to what is considered better times. Disenchantment with the present fuels the romanticization of the past.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, the lack of acquired knowledge of young people, primarily Zoomers, of the prior regime and its

abuses, is another reason for such sentiment. The way many participants described the Ben Ali era reflects their limited grasp of his rule. A few participants viewed him as a champion of foreign investment and economic stability, while others saw him as a fair ruler who prioritized the welfare of poor communities. A variety of sources shaped their perspectives. Some participants formed their impressions through exposure to social media, while others relied on the narratives told by their parents.

*He used to reduce the prices. He helped and cared for poor communities and did not try to oppress them. I read about him on social media.” (Male, 19, Kabaria)*

*Previously, we had investments and cooperation with other countries. We had social stability, and the economy was thriving. We were encouraged to be productive. Now, we are boiling in a debt crisis. (Female, 23, Kabaria)*

*I see Ben Ali as a good person; that is why he was buried in Saudi Arabia. (Female, 26, Downtown Kairouan)*

*I respect him; God bless his soul. He was a dictator but only with the rich [...] He had prestige and was respected among other countries. He took initiatives with other countries and held summits with them.*

The other answers provided a more critical view of the preceding generation. Participants described their parents’ generation as lacking a forward-thinking vision and accepting of the status quo. Their lives revolved around one clear path: studying, finding a job, and getting married.

*Close-minded. They are not conventional just in terms of religion or something, but they have no vision as to how they are going to change the future. The very idea of changing the future is not a thing for them. They live, that’s it. (Male, 25, Hajeb Laayoune)*

Most participants we interviewed expressed hesitation when discussing politics with their parents. Often, their political perspectives significantly differ, with each supporting different political parties or ideologies. As a result, these conversations tend to be tense or challenging to get through, leaving them feeling misunderstood and unheard by their parents.

*We don’t speak about politics. We rarely gather together. And even when the topic is talked about, I don’t participate in the discussion. (Male, 18, Kabaria)*

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*We have different ambitions. They try to impose their beliefs. I prefer not to share my opinion since they don't respect it. (Male, 28, Kabaria)*

*We speak, but we have different views. They think the situation before the revolution and the 25th of July was better than now. Our problem is each one of us supports a political party. Every time we speak together, we end up shutting off the conversation.*

*The most difficult thing is trying to change the mindset of someone who has followed the same ideals for a long time. I tried to convince them to vote for several years, but I failed. I have family members who supported Ennahdha just because they thought they were spreading Islam. I told them they should watch the presidential debate, get informed about their projects, and avoid letting word of mouth cloud their judgment. (Female, 23, Kabaria)*

The younger generation is less fearful of change than their parents. They are trying to adapt to the constant changes in their context, recognizing that alternatives exist beyond the systems they have inherited, and do not feel obliged to settle for the status quo. For example, they are actively involved in civil society, a safe environment where they can connect with like-minded people and explore new experiences rather than adhere to their parents' vision.

*Our parents are against us going out and participating in civil society; they are against seeing you doing stuff with your friends (someone mumbles disapproval). No, I lived it, I can tell you. I don't know. They are limited in their ideas. As 25M said, they lived this and that but did not want to share our changes or new ideas. They lack "wa'ii":<sup>31</sup> They keep saying, "We did not do this in our time." It's all copy/paste. (Female, 27, Hajeb Laayoune)*

## Political Environment, Discrimination, and Regionalism

### Kairouan

One of the central parts of our questionnaire dealt with the perception of oneself and one's peers in the region and vis-à-vis the rest of the country. We were keen to ask young people, in anticipation, if they put themselves in the shoes of others, what these others think of them as individuals,

but also of their peers, i.e. the youth of Kairouan, Hajeb Laayoune, Chebika, and Kabaria. The others here were firstly young people from the rest of the governorate, i.e. Tunis and Kairouan, and then young people from the rest of the country. Then we asked them to write down what certain regions or neighborhoods evoked for them in one word, without justification.

In Kairouan, young people consider themselves to be negatively perceived on two levels: on the governorate level for those who are not from Kairouan city, and on the national level. On a national scale, young people feel trapped in stereotypical images that outsiders think are positive, but which are nothing more than clichés, such as maqroudh (a famous Kairouanese pastry) or kafeji (a Tunisian dish that has a Kairouanese iteration of it).

*I left Kairouan, and I studied at a university. My friends see me as "ka'ba Maqroudh" (a piece of pastry) (Male, 25, Chebika)*

*In Tunis, Sousse, they see us as people who use donkeys to move around and wear "mle7ef (a piece of cloth) and "barnous." (traditional coat) (Male, 33, Kairouan City)*

**Kairouan governorate is targeted by a "sexual frustration" image.** The young people of Kairouan are also targeted by a cliché that turns the men of Kairouan into sexual harassers. In general, they are targeted by the insults that the coastal regions reserve for those who come from the inland regions. These insults are there to convey the idea that people from Kairouan are less "evolved", and "civilized" than those from the capital and the Sahel.

*If we look at the country's level, there is this idea that if you're from Kairouan you are a sexual harasser. Karoui (someone from Kairouan) = harasser. Even in Facebook groups, (A lot of people start reacting, "Memes" someone says). It's a joke but (someone mumbles "It Hurts"). No, it does not hurt. If the person generalizes about Qrawa (Plural of Karoui) in an act or two, I can give you twenty acts that happened in the South or in Medenine, and I'll tell you "This person is a harasser". This thing (the harassment accusation) is still happening and is causing a lot of trouble, and it's dangerous. If you want to do networking or something like that. With all due respect to journalists and media, you feel that this tale is fabricated. There was a story of an "act" "cas," old woman raped in her house in Kairouan, then another a girl was raped and murdered in La Marsa, and the accused guy happened to be Karoui. So in the media and social networks, it was worked upon and baked. People need to work on this and repair this cause*

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*it's a dangerous phenomenon. (Male, 25, Hajeb Laayoune)*

*I will not deviate from the opinions of others. If you go to the Sahel or the North, you hear: "jabri" (slob) "makboutin" (sexually frustrated) "m'aqdin" (to have complexes) and "Since when do you know how to dress?" It depends on the region. In Kairouan or my neighborhood, with other young people, it is more like, "What are you still doing here? Go travel and see other countries." (Female, 24, Kairouan City)*

In Hajeb Laayoune in particular, a buzz-inducing "news item" that happened a few years ago has resulted, according to the young people we interviewed in them having a "bad reputation" around the governorate and the country:

*"Chabeb el qwaress..." (the story of the men who died because they drank perfume thinking it would get them drunk), they forgot everything good about Hajeb and went for this story. That is at the governorate and the national level. (Female, 29, Hajeb Laayoune)*

Participants often used comparisons to disarm these clichés:

*I studied in Tunis, nothing ever happened to me in Kairouan yet in Tunis, I was mugged, harassed, etc. As XX said, the light is on Kairouan although a lot of things happened in Tunis. The policemen who killed and raped a girl [in Tunis], nobody talked about that. (Female, 30, Hajeb Laayoune)*

By pointing out what's happening elsewhere, they demonstrate the unjustified and unfair nature of the cliché: what difference is there between Tunis and Kairouan to make the same news item in one case a simple news item, and in the other, evidence of a truth about a given area. The role of the media is then pointed out, as they are said to reinforce and entrench existing beliefs.

**These "clichés" and stereotypes interact with a more general logic of othering the inhabitants of interior regions which has been an important feature of the Tunisian national construction since Independence.** The fact that people from Kairouan are perceived as "backward", "traditional", "jabri" and above all, "sexually frustrated" shows that the regionalism which was historically promoted by people like Bourguiba (who spoke of the inhabitants of some regions as a "humanity apart")<sup>32</sup> is still prevalent: some are "modern" while others are "backwards" and need to be tamed.<sup>33</sup> These claims have been historically used to marginalize the populations of these areas, offering them less public services as they

were deemed too "backward" to deserve any. This is key in what Hibou called the "asymmetrical construction of the Tunisian State".<sup>34</sup> Kairouan being an interior region with a strong urban tradition stands somehow midway, which explains the discrimination phenomena internal to the region that young people have talked about.

**These clichés are not confined to the coastal regions. Kairouan itself is divided.** This division separates those who live in the governorate's capital, Kairouan, and those who live outside the capital. It is embodied in the dialect by the use of *qa* in Kairouan city and *gué* outside the city. A participant from Hajeb Laayoune offered a historical explanation of the phenomenon:

*In Kairouan there is the medina, they are the original "inhabitants", those inside the walls of the medina. The families there have been there for centuries. There is a woman who came on the radio to say, I would never give my daughter (for marriage) to a guy outside of the walls. It became a "racism" issue. This is the very thing that is happening. You see, all these people who live outside the medina in Kairouan are doing this whole thing against us. The real Beldi (those from inside the walls) would not behave like this. They don't even think that way. You know who does this? Those who are outside the walls do this, although it's none of their business, cause if we go back to history, if we look at family trees, you will see that those having those opinions are either Hammami or Jlassi (tribes). We answer them with our work and manners. The message is sent and it arrives and it will keep arriving. (Male, 25, Hajeb Laayoune)*

Interestingly, the young man highlights the usurping nature of those who discriminate against those living outside the governorate capital. They themselves once lived outside the city but would behave in a way that was "more royalist than the king" towards their former peers. This explanation is interesting because it attributes a kind of innocence and nobility to the "real Beldi", who would have nothing to do with such things. On the other hand, there's the idea of answering the stigma with one's merits, which we hear regularly from people who suffered discrimination at the hands of the inhabitants of the capital and the Sahel.

A participant in Kairouan recounted an episode of verbal aggression from a "Beldia" peer at university:

*As I am from Aalen (a rural area), people from Kairouan see me as "Jabreya men oura leblayek" ("You're a redneck from some shithole"). An incident happened to me at university with a girl from Kairouan. We were discussing classes when she told*

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*me, «Who do you think you are, enti jabreya men oura leblayek» (Female, 26, Kairouan City)*

### **Kabaria**

**The media is often responsible for creating a stigmatizing discourse towards youth.** In Kabaria, young people are negatively perceived nationally and locally. The participants continue to be subject to a stigmatizing national discourse shaped by the media, creating ready-made stereotypes. The participants cited a belief that stigma associated with their neighborhood affects how others view them, shaping their self-image. Many blame the media for exaggerating incidents and further stigmatizing their neighborhood—stories relating to Kabaria and its surroundings areas often concern violence, crime, and even terrorism.<sup>35</sup>

**The public's perception of young people has shifted significantly due to this adverse media attention and the securitization of unemployed Tunisian youth for years.** They are no longer seen as dynamic forces driving positive change in the community. Instead, they are increasingly viewed as a looming threat to society. For instance, during the Ben Ali dictatorship and post-revolution, the ruling elite relied on the securitization of unemployed youth as an argument to shape punitive mechanisms that render them “governable and manageable”.<sup>36</sup> Youth was also, to a more limited extent, constructed as a dynamic, future-driven population that needed to be encouraged and included politically.<sup>37</sup> As the problems of regional inequality and unemployment persisted, **the ruling elites portrayed the unemployed youth and post-revolution protesters as a potential threat to national security.** They created a narrative that “unruly” youth were having an adverse impact on an otherwise stable economic progress. The elite often presented another narrative where street protests of unemployed youth, demanding their right to work, were easily manipulated and hijacked by terrorists. Indeed, former Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi indicated in one of his speeches: “*It is never possible to imagine dignity without guaranteeing the right to work. But there were those who tried to hijack this protest and spread terrorism*”.<sup>38</sup>

**The ruling elites did not only rely on their speeches to securitize the unemployed youth; they also employed various techniques to reinforce their security-driven reasoning.** The use of arbitrary detention and deployment of the military at sites of protests were strategies aimed at reinforcing security and supporting the frame of a potential terrorist attack.<sup>39</sup> These measures lead to violent confrontations between the protesters and the police.

The securitization of unemployed youth is one layer of a long history of marginalization of Tunisia's younger population and its working-class neighborhoods. The

media has further reinforced these negative perceptions, resulting in a bitter sense of injustice expressed by many of the participants.

*What bothers me is the preconceived bad reputation even though nothing terrible has happened to me here. While my friends from outside, they are in “you poor thing!” mode.*  
(Female, 29, Kabaria)

*When you tell individuals living in La Marsa, Lac, that you are from Kabaria, they get scared. They see you as a criminal.* (Male, 28, Kabaria)

*We should not be angry as this image has been mainstreamed in the media for years. Since many people have never visited Kabaria, it is normal to have this perception.* (Male, 18, Kabaria)

**Educational institutions often reflect, replicate, and reinforce the discriminatory norms in Tunisian society.** These biases can manifest in how teachers interact with their students or in peer-to-peer interactions. Harassment situations and bad relationships between students or between students and teachers are all causes that can have a substantial impact on students and their mental health. It can bring a Tunisian student a feeling of “insecurity” and a “negative vision of the establishment.”<sup>40</sup>

*In my university, students are friendly with each other at the beginning. However, when we got to know each other better, I told them I was from Kabaria, and their treatment changed.* (Male, 32, Kabaria)

**In Tunisia, school environments appear to foster situations that lead to humiliation.** Young individuals perceive themselves as victims of morally unacceptable treatment. They describe their experiences, emphasizing concepts such as discrimination and humiliation, connected to various forms of social injustice.<sup>41</sup>

*Most people don't know Kabaria. One of my teachers kicked my brother and me out of class because we were from Kabaria. We decided to get excellent grades on the test to prove her wrong.*  
(Female, 23, Kabaria)

## Youth Political Values and Priorities

### The Dominance of Individual Values

In the questionnaire, we asked participants to choose from a list of values (we listed all the values that had been cited to us during the previous iteration of the project), the three values they felt were most important today in Tunisia, and which should dominate the political and social landscape. The results are as follows:

Values centered on the individual dominate the ranking. Two things stand out in this ranking: firstly, the predominance of awareness and responsibility. “Wa’ii” or “awareness” is something we’ve wondered about a lot in the past, as it already dominated our focus groups in 2021. While difficult to define, it is central to the participants’ discourse. As they describe it, it is a state of knowledge and awareness of the outside world, of the immediate environment, a way of being more rooted in the world. The cleaning campaigns that spontaneously followed Saied’s election were called Halet Wa’ii (awareness situation), symbolizing a return to wa’ii. We could even go as far as linking this notion with that of “wokeness”. However, the accusation of lacking “wa’ii”, aimed at both individuals and society, in general, is too recurrent in Tunisia, and too closely linked to the colonial imaginary (natives lacking civilization, education, intelligence etc.) to not arouse suspicion about the predominance of this

Values	Value 1	Value 2	Value 3	Total number of mentions
Awareness	11	4	4	19
Responsibility	2	6	9	17
Justice	3	7	6	16
Respect	4	7	4	15
Patriotism	10	2	3	15
Freedom	3	4	3	10
Accountability	0	3	4	7
Transparency	3	1	2	6
Equality	2	1	2	5
Forgiveness	2	1	1	5
Solidarity	1	2	1	4
Security	0	1	0	1
No answer/unclear	0	2	1	3
Ethics	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>123</b>

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notion. Along with the notion of responsibility, these two notions are most often presented from an individualistic rather than a collective point of view. Responsibility and *wa'ii* are meant to be embodied by individuals, the atoms of society. Responsibility was also raised to demand the political responsibility of people in power. But we mostly encountered the idea that if each person was responsible, then things would be better.

In a way, we can see in the predominance of this individualistic framing of awareness and responsibility, the impediment of the collective, political sphere, especially since Kais Saied's coup d'état. Whereas in 2021, one of the main answers we heard was "respect", as in "having a more respectful, less violent political life", today, collective action and the community are no longer places to invest with values; the search for a common ground is closed, and now each person is responsible for his or her part, and it is from this addition that salvation will come. The collective sphere is too unreliable, too unclear, and too arbitrary for it to be invested collectively. Moreover, these two notions are immediately followed by the notion of "justice", which is a demand often made by individuals towards the State, as Melliti and Moussa show. We might venture to say that without justice, this retreat toward the cultivation of individual values will persist.

*We cannot talk about respect without the base, the base is one aware (we'ii) of his entourage, of oneself, and one's environment. (Female, 24, Kairouan City)*

*Wa'ii is awareness of what surrounds you what's happening for the person to know what to do. (Female, 21, Hajeb Laayoune)*

*Facilitator: What is absence of wa'ii for you?*

*Lack of respect, disorder. Wa'ii for me is like a brainstorming, you get it, you get all values with it. (Female, 21, Hajeb Laayoune)*

*When you are responsible, you help yourself and others too. It is similar to having an inner voice motivating you to do things well. (Female, 23, Chebika)*

*Responsibility is a huge word. It would help if you were responsible in your work, education, etc. (Female, 21, Hajeb Laayoune)*

*It is necessary to have justice in the country—for instance, the students arrested for a song (Male, 21, Chebika)*

*Justice is the essential value that we must apply. As Ibn Khaldun said: (Justice is at the root of*

*civilization/society) "العدل أساس العمران" to build a modern and civil state, you need justice. (Male, 26, Chebika)*

The second thing that stood out for us was the fact that **the notion of patriotism ("love of the nation" in the expression we used in the questionnaire) was cited several times, and almost systematically in first position.** Of the thirteen times this value was cited in total, ten of them were in first position. It plays a key, grounding role for the participants. This denotes the still-operating hegemony of the nation as a sacred entity that should sweep away all divisions. It also denotes a still strong belief in voluntarism: if the country is really loved, then it will get better, and if it's not doing well, it's because some people don't love the country or don't love it enough.

*I did not put respect because there seem to be more essential values than respect and manners. I put on other stuff the country needs, especially in the current international context. Patriotism comes first. (Male, 29, Kairouan City)*

*People have to love their country to be able to change it. (Female, 22, Kabaria)*

*If people speak badly of Tunisia is because of our politicians. (Male, 29, Kabaria)*

## Assessment of Political Life

### Past

More than a decade has passed since Tunisia's revolution. Mostly led by youth, the revolution has nevertheless failed at engaging young people in formal politics either by voting or by being a member of a political party. As the country is going through a de-transition phase, led by someone who claims to speak for youth and who has received many votes from young people, it is worth looking into young people's relationships with today's politics. We decided to go with this chronologically. We started by asking the participants about their views on the Ben Ali regime. There were two significant attitudes toward the question. For some participants, the previous regime represented a time of relative stability and economic security. Contrasting these viewpoints, we encountered another group of participants who shared poignant testimonies of the regime's abuses.

**More and more young Tunisians are losing faith that democratic transition is able to achieve their "work, freedom, dignity"<sup>42</sup> demands and some feel nostalgia for the Ben Ali regime.** A sense of nostalgia for the previous regime is increasingly growing among young

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people from both generations. The expression “Amn w Amen”<sup>43</sup> (security and safety) was repeatedly mentioned during the focus groups to symbolize how life was under Ben Ali, clearly overlooking the past regime abuses and repressive environment. Many also mentioned the lower living costs during that period. Unsurprisingly, their opinions are shaped by the current situation: lower costs are contrasted to today’s brutal inflation, and availability of goods stands in comparison to today’s endemic shortages. In general, it is the lower prices and the general stability that were most missed.

*Ben Ali amn w amen (security and safety). Ok, it was oppressive, but we were in security. You go grocery shopping, and you’d find what you need. I don’t talk about politics, that’s another topic. That’s their business (she means politicians). But at least when you went out you were not afraid. The other day, I was going home with my mother, two guys harassed me on a scooter. (Female, 30, Hajeb Laayoune)*

*Food prices were more affordable before. However, the living standards have changed. Previously, we had investments and cooperation with other countries. We had social stability, and the economy was thriving. We were encouraged to be productive. Now, we are boiling in debt. (Female, 23, Kabaria)*

Nostalgia for Ben Ali subtly carries political ideals. More particularly, a certain conception of the State, both as a respected entity in international circles, and a feared entity at the national level (as in people were scared to commit crimes) was raised by some. We also encountered nostalgia that depicted Ben Ali as someone who cared for the poor, who only oppressed the rich and powerful, a sort of Robin Hood who made sure the “zwewla” (poor people) had okay living conditions. These idealized discourses are of course false, but they are to be paid attention to as they subtly carry desired values: State prestige at the international level, that is, international recognition, social stability and security, a just ruler despite the unjust system, etc.

*He used to reduce the prices. He helped and cared for poor communities and did not try to oppress them. I read about him on social media. (Male, 19, Kabaria)*

*We are less safe compared to before. The previous regime’s authority was powerful. People feared going to jail, being punished, etc. Now, they don’t care. (Female, 21, Kabaria)*

*I respect him, Allah yarhamou. (May God bless his soul) He was a dictator but only with the strong. With 10 dinars you would do your groceries and*

*you’d have change left. He had prestige among other nations, he was respected, he took initiatives with other countries, went to summits. What’s the name of that? Diplomatic relations. He brought the metro. He was the best president. My favorite is Kais, but Ben Ali is the best.*

**Millennials express more understanding of the authoritarian bargain.** Some of the participants, mainly Millennials, expressed their awareness of how the previous regime operated. The state’s control of the economy was being used to further establish political quietism. It was a quasi-tacit contract between the state and society whereby relative economic stability was exchanged for political deference.<sup>44</sup> Citizens leave politics to politicians, in exchange, they have decent living conditions.

On the other hand, some of the participants recalled stories about the previous authoritarian regime, highlighting the years of misrule and abuse.

*We hear these ideas constantly « Ben Ali fed us » and « Ben Ali kept us safe. » But many injustices happened during Ben Ali’s regime. I could speak about them until tomorrow. (Male, 33, Kabaria)*

*The Ben Ali’s regime was terrible. The « Trabelsia » were in control of the economy. It did not achieve social justice. We keep hearing people saying that food was cheaper (mentioning the price of one kilo of Bananas at that time). Let’s not forget the oppressive state discourse that kept people passive. There was no justice. Veiled women suffered a lot and could not go to study. (Male, 18, Kabaria)*

**The image of the previous regimes in the personal and collective memory of the participants remains mixed and ambiguous.** It compels people to align themselves with the official narrative, a version that is available to them. In Tunisia, the past keeps being reinvented, in a nostalgic manner. In 2016, a statue of Habib Bourguiba was reinstalled in downtown Tunis on the avenue he named in his own honor. Whereas the few monuments celebrating the revolution were slowly disappearing, the former dictator was resurrected as a post-revolutionary political symbol, serving a range of agendas. This is another clear example of how collective memory was deployed politically by the State at the time.

This nostalgia or “collective amnesia”<sup>45</sup> is facilitated by the absence of education reforms and the slowness of a memorialization process. There is a need to challenge “the monopoly of dictatorial truth with the myriad lived truths of people who suffered under dictatorship.”<sup>46</sup> In Tunisia, the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD)<sup>47</sup> broke new ground by broadcasting its public hearings, providing a record of the country’s history of human rights violations and giving

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much-needed recognition to dissenting voices. However, its series of narrow, reform-oriented recommendations on memory preservation highlighted the limits of its ability to effect change.<sup>48</sup> For instance, teachers were not included early in the process of transitional justice as they could have used their skills and ability to innovate and find creative teaching methods to fill or complement existing textbooks. Yet, they face a hurdle as they are still required to teach using textbooks from the authoritarian era. It is crucial to consider revising the school curriculum, incorporating the examination of the nation's recent history, and enhancing civic programs as vital measures to introduce new concepts and behaviors related to democratic citizenship.<sup>49</sup> Education and cultural sector still have a huge role to play in helping the next generation come to terms with Tunisia's abusive past.

### Present

As we continue to understand young people's engagement with politics, our questions are also connected to the present context. We were particularly interested in understanding whether their perceptions of President Saied's power grab have evolved since 2021, assessing his performance to date, and exploring their current concerns amidst the ongoing phase of political turbulence. We specifically designed the question to gather the youth's perception on the night of 25 July 2021 and now.

In the first iteration of the project (2021-2022), the participants drew a particular interest in Kais Saied, whose name was brought up in each focus group. He was regarded as distinct from the other political figures, offering a promising prospect for battling corruption. However, the 2023 participants were growing disappointed with the president's performance.<sup>50</sup>

**Participants saw the coup as a new start.** Coming back to the night of the coup, many participants viewed Saied's speech and mainly his decision to dissolve the parliament as a new start for most of the Tunisian population. Their view concurs with what we gathered during our 2021 focus groups and more generally, with surveys. The confidence in the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) had been relatively low, with rates of only 18% in February 2021, 19% in May, and 17% in July, as reported by Sigma Conseil.<sup>51</sup> Over the past decade, the privileges and legal immunity for the members of the ARP have given rise to an increasingly anti-parliamentarian sentiment. The parliament had also turned into a place for disputes and physical attacks between political parties.

*I was happy that night because the circus that was the parliament was closed. It was not a parliament it was a zoo. We looked at it one way and then saw*

*it another way. Ennahdha was messing with the parliament. The closure, seeing them in front of closed doors, made me happy and I shared it on Facebook. Because of that closure, unemployed people lived it, and those whose freedom was taken away lived it. Many people lived it. I was happy at that moment. (Female, 32 - Hajeb Laayoune)*

*He did what the people wanted him to do. The parliament did everything but what the people wanted them to do. (Male, 26, Chebika)*

**However, the lack of change is making Saied lose his popularity.** If most of the attendees were happy with the parliament's closure, most of them now express disappointment with Saied. Some have not seen change, others see a straight-out reproduction of the same patterns they condemned in the democratic transition. Others see a lack of clarity as a problem. Gradually, Kais Saied's popularity waned among the youth who played a crucial part in his November 2019 campaign and had high expectations in his bottom-up politics. Likewise, the participants expressed doubts about his inconsistent approach and openly criticized the new National Assembly, which reminded them of the previous ARP. Interestingly, only a couple of participants raised concerns about his regime's constant repression of political rivals, journalists and activists from civil society. Fearing the return of authoritarian tendencies was a minority view and was pushed by older and/or more politicized elements.

*I thought an accountability process would start, and things would change. We hit rock bottom. And now, he is targeting civil society that helped him (K.S) during Covid-19. (Female, 24, Kairouan City)*

*If you want that, you have to change the whole system, if you want Mouhasba (accountability), you need justice, laws. What do they do there? They shade each other. As soon as KS took power, clans were formed, his wife's gang and those against his wife and his wife's sister. (Male, 33, Kairouan City)*

*I changed my mind (about K.S) because the other day I was watching on the television the parliamentary session as they were drafting their set of rules. It was the exact same circus, they were absent, it was a mess. It is the same scenario repeating itself. (Female, 29, Hajeb Laayoune)*

*The state used many oppressive methods after the 25th of July. It was like a soft dictatorship. (Male, 26, Chebika)*

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*There is a simulation happening to us that we have taken from somewhere else. Step by step, we are repeating the Egyptian scenario. KS can say I am not a dictator or an oppressor, however, this is where we're going. Of course, it's a Tunisian version, so it's not the military but that's where we're headed. We are like puppets we are currently following that wave without even being aware of it in everything. Freedoms rights... We used to make fun of countries like Egypt because they would queue for everything but we have no food and no medication. (Male, 35, Hajeb Laayoune)*

Furthermore, we note that popularity and lack of popularity are immediately correlated with participation in elections: whoever still believes Saied, continues to vote, and those who are more hesitant, stopped voting at some point since the coup.

### Future

Almost two years after Saied's coup, his strategy to get Tunisia out of its impasse remains unclear to most attendees. Like many young Tunisians, the participants still wait for the same social and economic reforms. While most of them expressed a lack of confidence in the future, a few participants remained optimistic and adopted a waiting position.

*You cannot fix a country in two years. You cannot even build a house in two years, let alone a country. (Male, 27, Kabaria)*

*It is not clear what Kais Saied is going to do. Is he going to organize an early election? Is he going to challenge the current political landscape? I was happy that the Assembly was dissolved and hoped for a power shift. (Male, 18, Kabaria)*

**When questioned about their outlook on future political participation, most participants were increasingly disillusioned with the political system and apathetic toward political parties and politicians.** They feel alienated in the political space and do not see any future for them in that space. Despite the unprecedented rise in political parties since the revolution (more than two hundred parties were created), the parties have had trouble engaging and keeping people, let alone young people in their ranks. In 2019, Kais Saied elections reignited youth interest in politics as he emerged as a figure with an anti-establishment discourse. He was against the traditional party structure and shared the youth's anger at the political system. He attracted various youth groups and presented a discourse that resonated with their needs and demands. Two years after his coup, a significant gap

was created between what had been promised during his presidential campaign and the current situation. Youth are withdrawing from the political sphere after another letdown with Saied, who was able to rally them around him but slowly lost their support.

Like many frustrated youth, the participants are keeping their distance from institutional politics and becoming less and less engaged in political parties.

*I don't see favorable conditions to participate in political life (Female, 23, Chebika)*

*I don't see myself joining a political party anytime soon (Male, 36, Chebika)*

*Political life in Tunisia has wasted its chance since people no longer have confidence in politics and politicians. (Male, 29, Kairouan City)*

*Participating in politics does not depend on whether we have a democratic system or a multi-party context. It is more about being a project holder. The problems we had in the last ten years arose as most political actors did not have a clear project. (Male, 32, Kabaria)*

*If you are going to be involved in politics now, it won't be efficient. We don't have a democracy. The state is not organized. The way the state is operating is not working. We won't see any significant changes. (Male, 18, Kabaria)*

## Connecting Daily Experience to Politics: Expectations and Assessment of State Services

### Transportation

Regarding transportation, the situation is the same in both time and space: it is still bad, and it is as bad in the urban areas as it is in the countryside.

**Transport is scarce.** The main complaint in the governorate of Kairouan is the scarcity of transport inside of it. Although some distances are not significant (Chebika and Kairouan, for example, are only 16km apart), the lack of transport complicates mobility. The Kabaria district has been served by the metro since 1985, which, in a city that is growing much faster than its public transport network, is a form of privilege. Yet, as in Kairouan, scarcity is the keyword. Our very recordings confirm this scarcity. As the focus group room faces the metro station, we can clearly hear the arrival of the metro. And yet, the metro comes only too rarely. We heard it four times in two hours on Saturday (i.e. once an hour in each direction), and only twice in two hours on Sunday. Moreover, the metro is a place of insecurity: one participant told us of harassment and theft inside the metro.

**The scarcity of transport is not without consequences for people's lives.** In Kabaria, a young girl explains that she has stopped attending the university where she studies because of the lack of transport. The journey takes her three hours. That makes a total of six hours a day spent in transport. Another, again in Kabaria, lost his job because he was late for work because of the metro. The gradual disappearance of public transport is having a major impact on young people's lives, acting as a major obstacle to education and work. This is all the more remarkable given that the distances involved are seemingly negligible (12km separate Kabaria from the university in question for instance).

**The reign of hustling.** The difficulties of getting around mean that young people, whether in Kairouan or Kabaria, have to make do as best they can. Most go out hours in advance to get where they need to be on time.

*If you have an appointment at 10 AM in Kairouan, you must be at the bus station at 6 AM. (Male, 36, Chebika)*

A young teacher from Kairouan, whom we met in 2021, continues to hitchhike to the remote village where she teaches. However, she now benefits from a "louage" (a sort of van) that transports teachers but complains that this gives the driver too much authority.

*I will say the same thing I told you two years ago. I still hitchhike. Now, we have a "louage" that takes teachers back and forth. The driver has more authority over me than my dad. I must be at least one hour and a half early to make it on time. (Female, 24, Kairouan)*

The solution is therefore limited and corporative since it concerns teachers. She tells us that, when she hitchhikes with her white teacher's apron on, drivers stop and ask whether she is a doctor or a teacher, and that this is the basis on which they drop her off in Kairouan.

**Discrimination and guilt collide.** As they cope with the scarcity of transport, young people in Kabaria are sometimes victims of discrimination. One person complains that cabs sometimes refuse a fare to Kabaria (for it being too dangerous), while others disagree, saying that cab drivers understand, as they too often come from working-class neighborhoods. This discourse on the weight of discrimination is mirrored by one on guilt. Problems are turned against "one's own", the neighborhood's own. One young man, for example, says that it is the local's fault too:

*The subway only has room for 10 people and you've got 1,000 trying to get on. (Male, 27, Kabaria)*

This remark is met with protests, as other participants reply that people need to get to school or work. Then the same person will say:

*We need tickets. Even the citizen's awareness (wa'ii) is to blame, we're not angels, we're also doing the State a disservice. (Male, 27, Kabaria)*

This idea of wrongdoing (in this case, not paying for a ticket) is echoed by other young people from Kabaria, who explain that children and teenagers stone the subways as they pass. Referring to the responsibility of parents, they explain that it is normal if parents constantly complain about the metro that their children will go and stone it. These explanations are there to rationalize the absence of a service that is hard to explain and for which nobody really has a solution.

## Health

**There is a consensus on the reasons for the deterioration in healthcare services.** When it comes to health services, the findings are identical everywhere: there is an evident deterioration in services, whether in the capital, which has the highest concentration of public and university hospitals in the country, or in the provinces. However, from the accounts, the situation seems much more critical in the Kairouan region. During the focus groups, there was a general consensus that the problem lies not so much with the medical staff, who for the most part are excellent and do their best, but rather with the infrastructure: lack of hygiene, absence of machinery, lack of maintenance, etc.

For most participants, this infrastructure problem is the reason behind the mass exodus of Tunisian doctors to European countries.

In addition, several participants referred to the medical donations received by the State during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that these were either blocked at customs or not used. This indicates a lack of trust in the State: donations are hidden, and monopolized, and the State is not there to serve everyone's interests.

Some focus group participants have had very tragic experiences with public health services, so their assessment is all the more negative as they immediately had to bear the cost of lack of equipment, poor infrastructure, and inadequate social security cover.

*I have a family member who got sick during the pandemic. She was instructed to get an injection for 22,000 dinars every 4 months. Her family is struggling to pay this amount. (Female, 22, Kabaria)*

*From a personal experience, I lost my mom, and we went through the whole process. The day she died; we took her to the emergency. The hospital state was catastrophic. Medicine and equipment were missing. Even the toilets were dirty. The health sector in Kairouan is a wreck. We receive funding from Saudi Arabia and new equipment during COVID-19 that is hidden somewhere. (Female, 24, Kairouan)*

*The health sector is missing so many things. We need equipment. Once, I saw an accident and called the regional hospital to pick up the injured. But there was no available ambulance for the pick-up. So, I had to call someone I knew to take him to the hospital. (Male, 25, Chebika)*

*My dad was sick and needed to be transported to Kairouan. To do so, he needed an oxygen machine. The hospital did not want to provide the device. I had to break in inside an ambulance and steal one. Then, I returned it after they called the police. (Male, 36, Chebika)*

**In the absence of equipment, as in the case of transport, resourcefulness acts as a band-aid.** However, as the second anecdote from Chebika shows, it calls for spectacular action: Faced with the possibility of losing a loved one due to a lack of equipment or care, the individual has to resort to illegality to save the sick person. This anecdote gives a glimpse of the distress and helplessness created by the lack of equipment in public hospitals, or even, the lack of means when faced with the need to buy expensive medicines. Surprisingly, no mention was made of the private sector.

**No comparison or denunciation was made of this sector.** The feeling of injustice is there, but it does not cling to an object of comparison. The only comparison made was that of one participant who compared the state of hospitals to the medical TV series she watched.

*Doctors are struggling. You find one doctor in the emergency unit. The sector is missing equipment. It's filthy. I watch the TV show "the doctor" and I can see the difference (Male, 24, Kabaria)*

The comparison allows her to say that the state of the public hospitals she attends is "abnormal", but it does not lead to a denunciation of injustice. It could be said that medical injustice – the fact that some people receive better care than others – seems to have been normalized.

Finally, and this is a special case, the young people from Hajeb Laayoune, whom we had already met in 2021, all recognized an improvement in the town's hospital. Indeed, the emergency department was renovated between 2021 and 2023. However, one of the participants noted that this renovation was the result of German development aid.

*The State is running away from its responsibilities. It relies on NGOs (Non-governmental organizations), and international organizations, I'm seeing things, done by GIZ today that 30 years ago, it would have been the State's job. The State's attitude is "Give it to GIZ", "Give it to Corps". (Male, 35, Hajeb Laayoune)*

This is the only time the gradual abandonment of public service provision by the state has been mentioned. Here, it is evoked as a failure to meet a previous standard, and it seems no coincidence that the person voicing this criticism

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is among the oldest: he has experienced another standard, with which he can compare and tell the abnormality of the current situation.

### Education

When the discussion turned to the education system, opinions seemed less categorical than those on transport and health. This may be explained by the fact that some participants, especially in the Kairouan region, were teachers. Opinions varied according to position, while still being quite precise. For example, on more than one occasion, debates in the Kairouan region veered towards an assessment of a public policy introduced in 2018 by the then Minister of Education Néji Jalloul: this policy created a specialized pedagogy branch whose graduates are automatically hired to teach in schools (without, however, being paid regularly or even being regularized, i.e. signing a permanent contract).<sup>52</sup> Some of the participants have graduated from this program and take pride in it: It makes them specialists in pedagogy, which in their own eyes makes them more competent than older teachers, who have no modernized notion of pedagogy. This competence is recognized by their peers, who give credence to this modernized conception of pedagogy, which is presented as more valuable than knowledge itself.

The priority given to pedagogy rather than knowledge is seen as having radical potential in relation to older educational practices.

*When you work as a teacher, you take care of your personal or professional life. Not both. I have taught the same grade for the last three years (3rd year French and English). I decided to change the reader manual. I took the essential ideas and created a cartoon. The new generation of teachers is teaching with innovative tools. We take into consideration the child's psychology. I have five students with autism among 35 other students. Education is improving. (Female, 24, Kairouan City)*

And yet, despite being a valued resource recognized by peers, this training does not protect against precariousness: low salaries paid irregularly, no reimbursement of expenses, and material complaints are not lacking.

*Same thing! I have a customer card (meaning here, debt) in the library where I buy stationary, etc. Didactic and educational preparation is expensive. I spend most of my money on my work. I left with nothing by the end of the month (Female, 24, Kairouan City)*

And yet, in the eyes of an unemployed person, this same

branch of study becomes a symbol of injustice: How can you accept that the state automatically hires graduates from a given branch of study when so many others spend decades unemployed and indifferent to the state?

*Neji Jalloul's branch... What does it mean when someone spends 20 years unemployed, and someone studies for three years and gets a job? Hram (It's unfair) (Female, 32, Hajeb Laayoune)*

While in Kairouan, the education system is perceived in a nuanced way, in Kabaria, it is rather criticized. The curricula are more criticized there: they're old and haven't been updated for a long time, so some people find the same exercises in their nephews' notebooks. What's more, the educational environment is often the place where injustice is discovered:

*In my university, students are friendly with each other at the beginning. However, when we got to know each other better, I told them I was from Kabaria, and their treatment changed. (Male, 32, Kabaria)*

*My little niece has gone to do an exam. Those who studied with the teacher in private classes had already done the assignment, while those who didn't study with him, did an assignment that had zero relation to what they studied with this guy. But what can you do at this age? Can't you complain about a teacher at this age? (Male, 24, Kabaria)*

### Police

**An ambivalent relation, between symbolic violence and recognition.** The police are perhaps the institution whose relationship with the inhabitants of Kabaria is the most ambivalent. On the one hand, the young people we spoke to know that the police are there to establish clear spatial boundaries between working-class and affluent neighborhoods. For example, some of the young men we spoke to told us about their experiences with the police spot checks they undergo in affluent neighborhoods.

*After the revolution, El Menzah became more mixed because of popular neighborhoods like Omrane, Jbal Lahmar, etc. One area is behind Ariana's regional hospital, where its inhabitants go to Nasr to rob people. I went there and was stopped by the police. They spent three hours investigating with me, thinking I might rob someone. (Male, 29, Kabaria)*

*24M: We steal phones, but they are stealing millions.*

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*Facilitator: Why did you even find yourself at the police station?*

*29M: it is very common to ask us what we are doing in such places.*

*20F: We see it as a regular thing.*

*24M: We are used to it.*

However, this awareness of the class boundaries maintained by the police does not prevent the emergence of a feeling of solidarity with them. The same person, who had to spend three hours at the police station and whose only crime was to be in an affluent neighborhood, will later say:

*I've seen a lot of injustice from the cops, but I'm against violence toward them. Everyone has a cop in their family; my brother is a cop. (Male, 29, Kabaria)*

**Class identity and respectability matter more than politics.** This answer came in response to us showing an [image](#) of a young female demonstrator throwing paint at Tunisian police officers and asking the youth's opinion on this image. It was taken in January 2021 on Avenue Habib Bourguiba. The image was widely circulated, provoking outrage at what was perceived as an attack on the dignity of police officers and a clear lack of respect from protesters towards the police institution. It seems that young people in Kabaria, although directly targeted by police arbitrariness, don't recognize themselves in the capital's middle-class youth fighting police violence. This brings us back to our initial finding: young people do not form a coherent group: geographical and class divisions (which often go hand in hand) translate into discourses of distinction based on respectability among young people. So, faced with this image, the young man, while acknowledging that he has suffered much injustice at the hands of the police, opposes the violence (which can be considered to be mostly symbolic) against them. The girl is seen as lacking respect towards the police. Interestingly, he goes on to say that his brother is a policeman and that everyone in the neighborhood has a family member in the force. Thus, when faced with the image of a young middle-class woman opposing the police, he identifies with the police on the basis of social and familial proximity. We could argue here that, through the notion of respect towards the institution and refusal of violence, it is in fact class that takes over: the social origin shared with the policemen and the ability to identify with them, outweighs any hypothetical common struggle against police violence. But along with the importance of class, this also shows that respectability in the public sphere,

in the way one makes political demands, matters for the youth. This entrenches a conclusion we already made in 2021 which is that young people dismiss other youth through the denunciation of their way of asking for things from the State, and not just through distinction whether in class or in values.

We chose to show this image at the same time as a [photo](#) of a man in his fifties holding a placard protesting compulsory vaccination against Covid-19. We chose these two images deliberately. The second photo shows a peaceful demonstrator protesting a health regulation protecting the population. However, the object of his protest will not be picked up by anyone. Both in Kairouan or Kabaria, the image was read as a representation of a "civilized", peaceful, and right manner of asking for one's rights. The fact that the old man was protesting for something that harmed the collective well-being was not raised by anyone. Furthermore, respectability was raised by young people when talking about their own protests.

## Youth Trajectories and Mobility: How Young People Conceive of their Future

### **Professional Future**

**The civil service is no longer attractive.** When it comes to their professional future, there is a clear friction between those who have been unemployed for a long time and are waiting for a job from the state and others who express disdain for this expectation. In Hajeb Laayoune, for example, this led to an argument between two unemployed people: On the one hand, a young woman aged 32, unemployed for six years, who has just gone back to school in the hope of finding a job, thinks that once you've studied, the state has a duty to find you a job. Opposite her, a young man of 25 who has just finished his studies, is unemployed but works as a freelancer, he thinks that in the current economic situation, waiting for the State is absurd and that we should rather "rely on ourselves", with the idea that with the digital age, and freelancing, nothing is impossible. In this particular exchange, the generation gap seems to be

an important factor. On the one hand, someone who grew up in an era when the demands of unemployed graduates were the object of a certain solicitude, and on the other, someone who grew up in a period when talk of individual entrepreneurship became desirable. We noticed, for instance, that apart from people who undertook the pedagogy bachelor degree (which theoretically grants access to a teaching job upon graduation), only Gen Y people tried to apply for jobs in the public service through “conours”. Among Gen Z, attraction to the civil service is quite rare, with only those who study to become public servants (for example, those who study law to become bailiffs and notaries) waiting and hoping to be employed by the State. The rest of Generation Z demand things such as a general enhancement of the job market (without it meaning for them the expectation of being employed by the State), or better conditions, both infrastructural and financial to encourage entrepreneurship projects.

**Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, is seen as desirable.** However, many participants, from both generations, mentioned the administrative hurdles that await those who want to set up a business. On the one hand, the State is seen as a hindrance, due to its cumbersome administration. On the other, the rigidity of its monetary policies makes it impossible to have PayPal, for example.

## Migration

**The desire to leave is no longer called into question.**

Compared to our research two years ago, the first observation we made was the almost total disappearance of discourses that questioned the desire to migrate, arguing that it was necessary to stay in the country to develop it. While not everyone wants to migrate, those who do are no longer made to feel guilty. The disappearance of this discourse is no coincidence: much more than in the past, the economic horizon seems blocked, and the country seems to be sailing at sight. Inflation has eroded the purchasing power of most of the population, whose standard of living is falling. The country’s development horizon, which was seen as still capable of progress two years ago, seems completely stuck today. This change in discourse coincides with the changing profile of Tunisian migrants illegalized by European laws in recent years: it’s no longer young men who are migrating, but young women, children, and entire middle-class families, ready to sell their belongings to leave the country.

**Mass migration is palpable.** Another remarkable fact is that some people talk about the emptiness created by the surge of migration. For example, a young man from Kabaria who frequents the south of the country speaks of

regions emptied of their young people, which coincides with the statistics on irregular departures in these regions. In another case, a teacher in a village near Kairouan describes how half her pupils have left (she teaches at the primary level). Many have died, while the rest are locked up in the centro. Seeing neighborhoods, towns, and even classrooms empty gives a reality to migration that is all too rarely evoked. This unspoken violence of illegalized migration for those who stay: The feeling of emptiness, and the familiarity with the death of young children is a neglected aspect of the migration conversation.

The case of this teacher is one of the most striking. Two years ago, when we met her, she was determined to stay, driven by her vocation. Today, even though her situation has been regularized (she signed a permanent contract), and she enjoys the stability offered to public servants, she wants to leave the country for the Gulf states. She’s not particularly enthusiastic about the idea of leaving, but it seems self-evident to her given the difficulties she encounters, particularly financially: while living with her parents, she’s still unable to support herself with her salary.

*I have just been told “Mabrouk regularization.” I was regularized to be able to leave the country, quite simply. I’m going to teach in the Gulf, it sucks, and it breaks my heart, either that or I choose to teach and keep quiet here. And I tell you this, half of my students migrated illegally, there are those who the sea has swallowed (died) and those who are at the centro. (Female, 24, Kairouan)*

Interestingly, one person in Kabaria rejected the idea of living abroad on the basis of what she is seeing in her own family:

*Tunisia is my country, and I have the right to stay. Wherever the conditions, I feel deeply connected to it. I don’t think it is going to be heaven out there. I don’t like living or raising my kids abroad. Most of my family members live outside of Tunisia. They have an identity crisis, which is difficult. Here, we have free education which is a huge advantage. I was going to study in Jordan in an American school. The prices are so high. (Female, 23, Kabaria)*

Like most Tunisians, members of her family have emigrated. However, their experience is more of a deterrent than something desirable. This is rare enough to be noted. She prides herself on having a non-fantasized view of life abroad.

## Moving Out

One of the questions posed by our political ecology approach is whether people want to detach themselves from their immediate environment by moving, and if so, which destination in Tunisia would most likely satisfy their desire for change. That's why we asked participants where they would move if they had the chance, regardless of the means.

**In Kabaria, it's the desire to escape the urban life of the capital that predominates.** Most want to move to quieter provincial towns (Djerba, Bizerte, Nabeul, Kef), or even to villages (Ain Soltane) they've visited on vacation. Only two people mentioned moving to another part of town, one to the city center and the other to Mourouj (a nearby middle-class neighborhood).

**In the governorate of Kairouan, many people do not wish to move.** For the minority who would like to move, medium-sized towns on the coast are mentioned (Monastir, Mahdia). Tunis and Sousse are not particularly attractive and are only mentioned by those with a professional interest in moving to these cities: artistic career, civil society. Finally, it's important to mention that many people make their move conditional on their ability to take family members with them, particularly in Hajeb Laayoune.

**The desire to change one's environment by moving is not as recurrent as we had expected.** Moreover, it is rarely expressed in terms of moving to better-endowed towns or neighborhoods. The young people we spoke to would rather move abroad than within Tunisia. In this respect, we can say that they are both attached to their immediate environment and their networks of solidarity (family, neighborhood, town), to the point of not wanting to move within Tunisia to take advantage of better opportunities and are deeply disenchanted by what their environment and the country, in general, can potentially offer them: Opportunities are to be found abroad, not elsewhere in the country. If we go back to our political ecology framework, these results show that attachment to one's area, to one's ecology is such that despite its lacks, its deficiencies, it is preferred to strategic individual displacement in more well-off cities or neighborhoods. However, the willingness to move abroad which is much more widespread shows that individual strategies are prevalent nonetheless but just on a wider scale: if one is to find opportunities, one will aim at wealthy countries, and not at wealthy cities in a poor country.

## Conclusions

We believe it is crucial to always recognize the significance of directly documenting the perspectives of Tunisian youth. They constitute a vast demographic with diverse characteristics, including nuanced differences in geography, social background, economic status, cultural beliefs, and political viewpoints.

- **Saied's popularity among youth:** As young people were at the forefront of the Saied campaign, we believe it is important to delve deeper into the evolution of their perception of his politics and his persona. While parliamentary politics were rejected during the democratic transition and thus, his unilateral closure of parliament was welcomed, the current situation, in its unclarity, is growingly altering his level of popularity among young people. However, his popularity is not waning because of authoritarianism, but more because of the lack of delivery felt by most youth. This shows that democracy is not really valued per se. In the face of economic difficulties and lack of hope, democracy does not stand a chance if all it has to offer is democratic political institutions. Similarly, however, an authoritarian regime with nothing to offer but political institutions will not be popular but easier to maintain.
- **Nostalgia among youth:** The participants held high hopes after Kaid Saied's elections, particularly regarding employment opportunities, combatting corruption, and improving public services such as healthcare and transportation. However, they were disheartened by the State's inability to fulfill economic stability, security, and safety, leading to the reminiscence of the Ben Ali regime as an era of stability and prosperity. Only politicized millennials resist this narrative. This nostalgia carries with it an imaginary of the ideal rule or ruler which is interesting to delve further into. Furthermore, we may need to look at how lack of trust in the present actors and institutions, and idealisation of a long-gone past, translates into limited involvement in public life and reduced engagement with traditional political parties. Our intuition leads us to believe that young people show a preference for the apparent stability and absence of antagonism the Ben Ali era created for people to believe. This preference is all the stronger as the current regime does not seem ready to stabilize, and the previous one was one of both political and economic instability.
- **Values and Individualism:** The values put at the forefront by young people depict a growingly individualistic approach to the public sphere. The

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erosion of the political sphere along with the lack of hope for the future may lead young people to retract to areas where they believe individuals can exercise control, that is themselves as individuals, through responsibility and awareness. For most participants, coming together as a collective community is no longer considered a meaningful endeavor to uphold shared values. Instead, there is an emphasis on individual responsibility seen in their desire to leave the country as a last resort to build a decent future.

- **Education:** Education has had a limited role in the democratic socialization of the young people we spoke to. Yet, it should have had a massive role in helping the next generation come to terms with Tunisia's abusive past. For instance, the Ministry of Education reissues the same history textbooks each year without the intention to revise its content after the 2011 revolution. Questions regarding the means to educate the youth about aspects of recent history and collective memory, previously disregarded or downplayed, persist without satisfactory answers and solutions. Reforming the education system has been long overdue. Yet necessary, as many participants still find the Tunisian collective memory ambiguous. The reforms may include revising the history curriculum to acknowledge the legacies of past injustices, changing the dominant teaching methodology, and replacing it with a participatory approach based on critical thinking and analysis. Another way to introduce youth to new notions of democratic citizenship is through creating civic education programs. The reforms need to position learners as a central part of such a process, not just recipients of the curriculum but active learners using it for social change and individual progress.
- **Discrimination faced by youth:** The participants endure distress due to the negative stereotypical perceptions associated with their regions. This stigma affects their lives in significant ways, such as encountering discrimination at school, while seeking employment, or facing biased treatment in public spaces beyond their neighborhoods. When associated with lacking public infrastructure, these stereotypes can have detrimental effects on young people's lives. Any research on youth in Tunisia needs to pay attention to their political ecology and how their environment influences their views of themselves and their age group.

## Endnotes

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## 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

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## GAM

Founded in 2013, GAM is a social association which fighting to guarantee the cultural, social and economic rights of citizens in working-class neighborhoods and marginalized areas.

## WeStart

WeStart Organization is a Tunisian NGO founded in 2018 and works on civic education, economic rights and employability.

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