

Unpacking “youths” and the Arab Spring uprisings

By Laurent Bonnefoy

■ Executive summary

In the framework of the Arab Spring, the enthusiastic construction of “Arab youths” as a source of hope rather than a security or demographic threat was a clear departure from the usual narrative. Perceptions of “youth” are fundamental to the way events that have unfolded since 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa region are understood and, as such, these perceptions are central for identifying what policies decision-makers can and should implement. The object of this expert analysis is to shed light on the “youth” category and its relation to the political changes unfolding in the contemporary Arab world. Beyond any normative approach that assigns a particular political meaning and ambition to this category, the analysis will highlight the diversity of “Arab youths” and the necessity to understand them neither as a problem nor a solution, but rather as expressions or manifestations of complex existing social dynamics and tensions. As such, “youth” can hardly be perceived as a coherent political category.

Over the course of the last decade dominant images of “Arab youths” in the West have undergone significant shifts. For long perceived as central threats (due to migration, demography and “terrorism”), “Arab youths” were suddenly portrayed as potential “messiahs” in the context of the Arab Spring. Indeed, events in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in 2011 erected the younger segments of the Arab populations as the likely saviours of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In opposition to older generations, “Arab youths” were depicted as liberal, democratic and secular in essence. In such a framework they would therefore, it was claimed, compensate for the shortcomings and insufficiencies of their predecessors in matters of justice, freedom, equality (in particular gender equality) and tolerance. This social construction of “Arab youths” as sources of hope rather than threat built on the impression that this age category (roughly defined as those between the ages of 15 and 30) was marginalised and that Arab autocracies were also and foremost gerontocracies. It also fed on an academic and media narrative which asserts that Islamism is an ideology of the past and is consequently in decline, implicitly defining this political trend as an antagonist of “youth”.

The deconstruction of “Arab youths” as a relevant political category is necessary. Perceptions of this category are

fundamental to the way events that have unfolded since 2011 in the MENA region are understood and, as such, they are central for identifying what policies decision-makers can and should implement.

The object of this short expert analysis is to shed light on the “youth” category and its relation to political change occurring in the contemporary Arab world. Beyond any normative approach that assigns a particular political meaning and ambition to this category, the discussion will highlight the diversity of “Arab youths” and the necessity to understand them neither as a problem nor a solution, but as expressions or manifestations of complex existing social dynamics and tensions.

The Arab youth bulge

Demographers have highlighted a prominent characteristic of MENA societies. While national situations are disparate, all countries in the region remain engaged in their demographic transition. This implies that Arab societies are “young” and that national populations are still rapidly growing (on average by around 2% each year). The median age is a significant marker of this trend: 50% of the population in Yemen is under 16.4 years of age, and under 30.8 in Qatar. In Norway, the median age is 39.7, and 44.6 in Japan. Fertility rates in the MENA region have been

affected by state policies and cultural change, but remain higher than in other regions (apart from sub-Saharan Africa). In Tunisia, the fertility rate dropped from 7.18 children per woman in 1960 to 2.04 in 2010, but only dropped from 7.29 to 5.2 in Yemen over the same period.

Such a reality has numerous social, political and economic repercussions. Educating, feeding, accommodating and caring for so many young people bear a tremendous cost. Investing for their higher education, creating a job market that can integrate them, and building housing implies massive investment and resources that few MENA countries have. These investments appear to many as prerequisites before young people can become a factor for development and be seen by the rest of society (and the world) as assets. Furthermore, while children may be seen as rather passive or have a seemingly neutral impact on politics, this is not the case with teenagers and young adults, who express specific demands and react to public policies. These statements imply that the youth bulge in the Arab world (with, however, sharp differences among countries due to the differing economic resources available) is creating a crisis and generating significant tensions.

One or many generations?

Intergenerational tensions have been widely used as one of the central variables to explain the Arab Spring. Many of the public policies that were implemented by states in order to prevent massive contestation, like in Saudi Arabia or Algeria, targeted the youth through housing or employment projects. In countries where mobilisations did occur and succeed, the heroes and symbols of the uprisings could all be qualified as “young”: Tunisian martyr Muhammad Bouazizi was born in 1984, Egyptian blogger Wael Ghonim in 1980, and Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawakkul Karman in 1979. Activists in 2011 generally portrayed themselves as such. The term *shabab al-thawra* (“revolutionary youth”) became a self-legitimising label and activists well over their forties claimed to represent the youth and consequently sought to instrumentalise the dynamic that had been launched in the streets of the Arab world.

Considering the demographic structure of MENA societies, the over-representation of younger segments of the populations during demonstrations was not surprising, but this is not particularly significant – indeed, one is yet to see in world history a revolution carried out by the elderly.

The implication of younger generations in the mobilisations and the mimetic nature of the initial uprisings (similar slogans and forms of contestation and shared instruments for mobilisation – social media on the Internet, pan-Arab satellite news channels) gave the impression of the existence of a common generation across the various MENA countries. Such an image is only partially true because it blurs the diversity of “Arab youths”. First of all, differences among countries are massive and the experiences of young people depend on multiple internal factors:

the nature of the regime itself and the level of repression, a country’s history (in particular its colonial past), its wealth, and the capacity of its citizens to access education, health facilities and international mobility. Then, within each country the generational variable is not systematically significant, because economic, social, ethnic and religious variables can entail a wide variety of practices, attitudes and identities – and also divisions. These can then be much more important determinants than the generational factor. This is, for example, the case in Syria, where the conflict has structured itself along increasingly sectarian lines and can hardly be understood as a generational one.

Furthermore, defining “youth” is difficult and the biological categorisation by age (for instance between ages 15 and 30 or otherwise) is insufficient. Social dynamics are establishing youth as a malleable category. While most would acknowledge that youth starts with puberty and the rise of sexuality, the time of youth is in a number of instances extending as the average age of marriage is delayed and unemployment is high. The abandonment of military conscription has also contributed to the disappearance of a number of “rites of passage” into adulthood. The category then appears as blurred.

The “stolen revolutions” narrative

Despite the diversity of “Arab youths” and the questionable relevance of this constructed political category, a powerful narrative has progressively become dominant. Since early 2011 the various Arab uprisings, whether successful or not in toppling authoritarian regimes, have seemingly been undergoing similar processes. Indeed, they have all apparently suffered from what is described by many local and international actors and analysts as a kind of hijacking. In most cases, revolutionary street mobilisation allegedly initiated by the “revolutionary youth” has been massively appropriated (some claim “stolen” or “confiscated”) by institutionalised actors, particularly political parties that pre-existed the revolutionary processes (primarily the Muslim Brotherhood) and also by the military, all of which are controlled by actors that are far from young.

This process of appropriation has undeniably diminished the scope of change and increased control over the various outcomes of the mobilisations, either political or symbolic, paving the way for much disenchantment among an allegedly progressive and pacifist “youth”.

The situations in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya or Syria reflect this broad narrative. In all these countries the *shabab* as a self-proclaimed political group have been unable to determine the political and social outcomes of the movements and uprisings they launched. Since 2011 they have been systematically sidelined by the various transition processes, instrumentalised by higher geopolitical interests and persistently marginalised during elections. Political parties have proved to be resilient and no political force genuinely representing the “youth” has yet emerged. The generational variable consequently does not

appear as sufficiently structural to determine the outcomes of the transitions that are under way.

The “stolen revolution” narrative can be nuanced if one accepts the idea that “Arab youths” are not a free-floating or independent category distinct from existing parties and movements, despite the fact they have often been constructed as such. The “revolutionary youth” and the actors that took part in the mobilisations were all part of a large spectrum that goes well beyond the group that has been labelled the *shabab*. The “revolutionary block” is as a consequence far from uniform. As such, the revolution is not the “youth’s” property or their creation, exclusive of all other groups, but the complex by-product of previous mobilisations and a specific context. It is rather artificial to think of the *shabab* as a wholly new group that emerged recently, and that was alien to the political field prior to 2011 and separate in essence from the opposition parties or previous movements of contestation.

It is also wrong to consider that youth and Islamism are antagonists. The alleged absence of Islamist parties, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, during the first days of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt has been over-rated. While the leadership of these movements may indeed have

appeared to be cautious or silent in early 2011, lower-ranking individuals were undeniably active, and many among them qualified as young and Islamist or fed on preceding mobilisations (such as the 2006 presidential elections or the Southern movement in Yemen, or the 2005 *kifaya* movement in Egypt). The same goes for anti- or counter-revolutionary movements – many of the soldiers and policemen repressing the opposition were also “young”.

“Youth” as a political category therefore lacks both coherence and significance. “Arab youths” must therefore be analysed not as distinct actors, but as a nexus or an expression of competing interests, strategies and practices. Taking into account such variety and complexity is important, because public policies that are meant to mend existing tensions might end up doing more harm than good if they erect the generational factor as the sole relevant variable. Economic hardship and repression are largely transgenerational. Considering youth as a target group might become a self-fulfilling prophecy if it means constructing exclusion as a by-product of youth. This would inevitably distract from other much more significant antagonisms that are linked to social status, origin, identity, and gender and that continue to play a fundamental role in existing tensions in the MENA region. ■

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