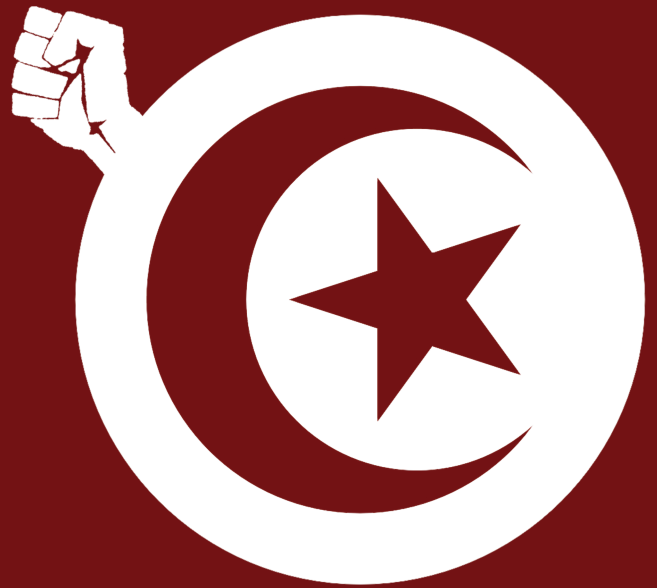


Where Have All the Revolutionaries Gone?

BY SARAH YERKES



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Where Have All the Revolutionaries Gone?

Introduction

Following the 2010 and 2011 revolutions commonly known as the “Arab Spring,” the relationship between the individual and the state across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has fundamentally shifted. Prior to the Arab Spring, most authoritarian regimes in the region allowed for minimal forms of political expression mainly as a form of pressure release, believing they had complete control over their citizenry. But when those same leaders watched ordinary citizens succeed in removing President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had maintained power in Tunisia for 23 years, and subsequently saw protests spread like wildfire across the region, the leaders who survived and the successors to those who did not developed a new understanding of the ability of their people to demand and execute change. This understanding caused a transformation in the relationship between the government and the governed across the region, but the result of this change has varied. In Egypt, the state has initiated a brutal crackdown on dissent surpassing the scope and severity of the pre-revolutionary regime, aimed at preventing any potential political or social uprising. In several of the region’s monarchies, such as Jordan and Morocco, the government enacted façade reforms to placate the public while simultaneously ensuring their own longevity. And in one lone case, Tunisia, the shift in state-society relations has resulted in a democratic transition, opening up the political space in a real and meaningful way and providing a greater voice for the citizenry.

In Tunisia, this change is visible across all demographics—young and old, Islamist and secular, liberal and conservative. It is most pronounced for Tunisia’s Islamists, many of whom had been jailed or forced into exile under Ben Ali, and for whom the opening of the political space post-revolution meant a literal return to the streets of Tunis. For non-Islamists, the story is more complicated. Prior to 2011, political life in Tunisia was sharply con-

strained. With the exception of a handful of activists, most non-Islamist Tunisians tacitly agreed to play by Ben Ali’s rules. The Ben Ali government cracked down on any political activity that was in opposition to the state through legal restrictions, use of force, threats, and intimidation. The regime set clear red lines and manipulated all forms of civil society from trade unions to human rights activists to the media.

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including human rights organizations, pro-democracy groups and others advocating for individual rights, such as women’s rights, were highly restricted—with individual activists often operating in secret or in exile. While on the eve of the revolution close to 10,000 CSOs existed on paper, one study stated that only 10 of those CSOs could be considered truly independent.¹ Nevertheless, civil society was active, within limits, and managed to challenge the state in both overt and covert ways. Although much of civil society was at least partially co-opted by the state, prior to the Tunisian Revolution, a civil society movement existed and was led, in large part, by young, non-Islamist Tunisians advocating for greater social and political rights and equality.² Therefore, when the Tunisian Revolution took place in 2011, blasting open the doors of the political sphere, one would expect a flooding of the political space, particularly by the non-Islamist youth who brought about the revolution in the first place. In reality, since the revolution, non-Islamist youth have largely abstained from formal politics and Tunisia witnessed a significant drop-off in voting and political party participation from 2011 to

1 Foundation for the Future. 2013. “Study on Civil Society Organizations in Tunisia.”

2 Chomiak, Laryssa. 2011. “The Making of a Revolution in Tunisia.” *Middle East Law and Governance*: 68-83.

2014, with more than two-thirds of young Tunisians boycotting the 2014 elections.³

While certainly some young non-Islamist revolutionaries have been able to accomplish impressive feats, from securing seats in parliament and heading government ministries to starting influential non-governmental organizations (NGOs), their level of participation (defined as joining a political party, running for office, voting, or serving in government) in formal politics has consistently belied expectations. Relative to other countries in transition and democracies, the level of youth participation in Tunisia is staggeringly low. For example, according to the World Values Survey, less than 13 percent of Tunisian youth (under 30) say they “always” vote in national elections. This is compared to 80 percent of Argentine youth, 78 percent of Brazilian youth, 77 percent of Indian youth, 80 percent of Peruvian youth and 55 percent of Romanian youth.⁴

However, non-Islamist youth are not uninterested in politics. While they have chosen to disengage from formal politics, they are more likely than older generations to participate in *informal* political activity, including participating in a boycott or demonstration or engaging in a strike or non-violent protest.⁵ A few explanations exist for this puzzle—why Tunisian youth have largely abstained from formal politics and opted to channel their political energy through informal politics. Most commonly, analysts argue that non-Islamist youth are disappointed by the trajectory of Tunisian politics over the past five years and have grown apathetic.⁶ Some have contended that non-Islamist youth were

crowded out of the post-revolution political space by Islamist groups and former regime elements or were deliberately held back by the older generations.⁷ Others attribute the drop-off in formal political participation to the inability of the revolutionaries to translate their success to the political arena.⁸

I will argue that the low level of youth participation in formal politics is due, primarily, to the attractiveness of informal politics (particularly civil society) relative to traditional politics. While some young non-Islamist activists tried politics and have since chosen to exit the arena out of frustration, many never intended to participate in the first place, instead choosing to start CSOs or grow their informal networks, developed prior to the revolution, without any intention of joining the formal political sector. In part because informal political activity was the only type of engagement available to most Tunisians—particularly the young people who grew up under Ben Ali’s rule—while the political environment has dramatically changed over the past five years, the way the youth have chosen to exert influence has remained largely the same. This combination of active disengagement by non-Islamist youth from formal politics and a new focus on informal politics has implications both for the ability of civil society to fulfill its role as guardian of the democratic transition and for the stability of Tunisia’s political system.

As I explain, Tunisia is experiencing a dangerous imbalance between civil society and politics. As

3 Network for Rights and Development & International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights. 2014. *Joint Observation Mission to Tunisian Parliamentary Elections 2014: Report*. Global Network for Rights and Development & International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights.

4 World Values Survey database. <http://www.worldvaluesurvey.org/wvs.jsp>. The World Values Survey defines youth as under 30.

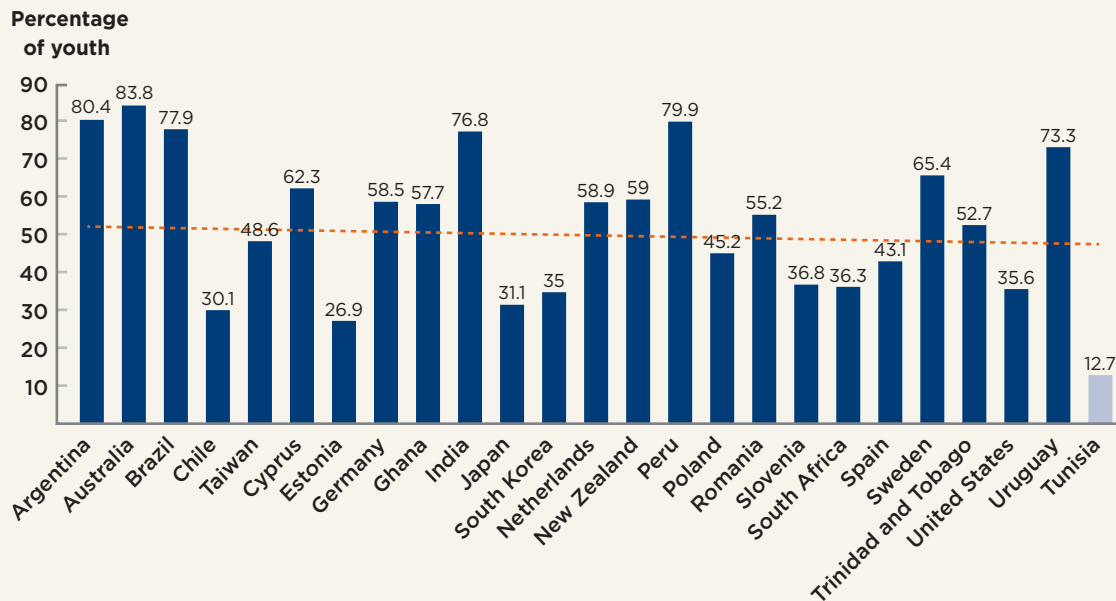
5 Ibid.

6 Lamloum, Olfa. 2016. *Politics on the margins in Tunisia: Vulnerable young people in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen*. London: International Alert; Boughzala, Mongi. 2016. “Youth Employment and Economic Transition in Tunisia.” In *The Arab Spring Five Years Later: Case Studies*, by Hafez Ghanem, 153-176. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

7 See, for example, Ghafar, Adel Abdel. “Five years later, lessons of the uprisings in North Africa.” *Markaz (blog)*. February 5, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/02/05-lessons-of-arab-spring-abdelghafar>; Asseburg, Muriel, and Heiko Wimmen. 2016. “Dynamics of Transformation, Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World.” *Mediterranean Politics* 21 (1): 1-22; Boduszynski, Mieczyslaw P., Kristin Fabbe, and Christopher Lamont. 2015. “Are Secular Parties the Answer?” *Journal of Democracy* 26 (4): 125-139.

8 Khatib, Lina, and Ellen Lust. 2014. *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; Khatib, Lina. 2012-2013. “Political Participation and Democratic Transition in the Arab World.” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 34 (2): 315-340; Bayat, Asef. 2013. “The Arab Spring and its Surprises.” *Development and Change* 44 (3): 587-601.

FIGURE 1. Percentage of youth (under 30) in transitioning states and democracies who say they “always” vote in national elections



Source: World Values Survey

Note: This chart compares all of the available countries in the World Values Survey database that fit Freedom House's definition of "Free" (i.e. have an aggregate score of 71 or above). The average for these countries is 53 percent of youth who say they "always" vote in national elections. <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

youth abstain from the formal political sphere in favor of the informal, the ability of Tunisia to fully consolidate its democratic gains is under threat. The disdain with which young Tunisian activists view the political sphere has contributed to an increasing level of antagonism between civil society and the state which has the potential to destabilize Tunisia's political system. Additionally, the lack of desire or ability of civil society to build alliances with the government prevents civil society from fulfilling all of its democratic roles, most notably preventing the key bridging mechanism required for civil society to effectively channel the interests of the public to the government.

Why focus on non-Islamists?

This paper explains the lack of political participation by non-Islamist youth, largely ignoring the experience of Islamist youth for several reasons. First, non-Islamists have been vastly understudied com-

pared to Islamists following the Arab Spring. Second, the experience of Islamist and non-Islamist activists prior to the revolution was starkly different. President Ben Ali's crackdown on civil society in the early 1990s explicitly targeted Islamist civil society organizations, forcing many Islamist opposition figures into exile and ensuring that most of the pre-revolutionary CSOs remained secular (or at least non-Islamist) in nature. While the regime also clamped down on some non-Islamist groups, these activists had a larger space in which to operate in the years preceding the revolution. Third, the revolution was largely led by non-Islamist youth, as many Islamists remained in exile during the early days of the revolution. As some have noted, Tunisia's uprising, unlike others in the region, was "Islamist free."⁹ And while following

9 Koplow, Michael. "Why Tunisia's Revolution is Islamist-Free." *Foreign Policy*. January 14, 2011. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/14/why-tunisia-revolution-is-islamist-free-2/>.

the revolution, both Islamist and non-Islamist activists flooded the civil society arena, Islamist youth engaged in formal political activity to a greater degree than non-Islamist youth. Ennahda, Tunisia's main Islamist political party, has been far more successful than the non-Islamist parties in attracting youth. Ennahda leadership has prominently and visibly placed younger political figures, including 33-year-old spokesperson Oussama Sghaier and 29-year-old Sayida Ounissi, the youngest member of the current government, at the forefront of their party. In addition, Ennahda has undertaken a more comprehensive youth recruitment program than the non-Islamist parties, providing a greater quality and quantity of opportunity for formal political participation for young Tunisians.

It is important to differentiate between Islamist and non-Islamist activists who operated under different constraints prior to the revolution and who played different roles during and after the revolution. As Sarah Feuer notes about the post-revolutionary period, "the aims of Tunisia's CSOs remain largely secular in nature, and to speak of Tunisian civil society is to speak of predominantly non-Islamist groups and individuals pursuing reforms in a public space between family and state that remained elusive for decades."¹⁰

A note on terms

before proceeding, it is important to define a few key terms used in this paper. First, the terms "non-Islamist" and "secular" are used interchangeably throughout much of the academic and policy literature to distinguish groups and individuals who espouse religious freedom, pluralism, and at least a nominal distinction between mosque and state from "Islamists" who advocate for a greater role of

religion within political and personal life. The term "secular" has different connotations in the MENA region and the West. Less than 1 percent of individuals in the MENA region would qualify as secular in the Western sense (not identifying with a particular religion).¹¹ And 99.5 percent of Tunisians identify as Muslim.¹² Thus, while some of Tunisia's non-Islamists (including individuals, political parties, and civil society organizations) self-identify as secular, this paper uses the term "non-Islamist" to better capture the group of people who are non-Islamist politically, but may, in fact, be religious personally. The exception is when analyzing survey data where respondents were asked to self-identify by level of religiosity and where I am thus able to differentiate between secular and religious individuals.

Second, the term "youth" varies widely across the literature. The most common definition is 18 to 35 years old. However, some surveys and studies include varying age ranges such as 15 to 24 or 29 and under. Unless otherwise noted, when referring to "youth," I am referring to the age group from 18 to 35 years old. Additionally, Tunisian youth can be divided into two main categories—revolutionaries and the general public. The revolutionaries are the activists—individuals who were engaged in informal political activism prior to or during the revolution and continue to be politically engaged in either the informal or formal spheres. The revolutionaries and the ordinary public operate differently, with unique goals and incentives. Thus, their behavior is expected to differ and their motivations for participating in formal politics must be understood within their particular context.

Finally, within the political science literature, "political participation" is often defined as "activity by

10 Feuer, Sarah. 2015. *Beyond Islamists & Autocrats: Post-Jasmine Tunisia*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Islamists are particularly active in the charitable sector through foundations, Quranic associations and mosques. However, this paper is concerned with civil society in the form of informal political activity where non-Islamists are dominant.

11 For a good discussion of the term secular in the region see: David Schenker, "Beyond Islamists and Autocrats: Introduction to the Series," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/BeyondIslamists-Schenker.pdf>.

12 "Middle East-North Africa." Pew Templeton Global Religious Futures Project. http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/regions/middle-east-north-africa/religious_demography#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010.

private citizens designed to influence government decision-making.”¹³ Thus, participating in civil society is sometimes considered “political participation.” Nevertheless, as this paper argues, participating in organizations and activities outside of government has a fundamentally different impact on democracy than participating in formal political activity. Thus, I distinguish formal political activity from civil society participation.

Organization of the paper

This paper seeks to determine why young, non-Islamist Tunisians have increasingly abstained from formal politics since 2011 and, in doing so, assess the impact of this abstention on the health of Tunisia’s democracy. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section examines the low level of youth formal political participation. It proceeds with a brief discussion of why youth participation is important in Tunisia. It then explains what youth participation looks like and why we should expect higher rates of formal political participation. I then describe four possible explanations for the low level of non-Islamist youth participation in politics—disillusionment with the post-revolution government, the generational divide, a lack of organization by the revolutionaries, and a previously overlooked explanation: the attractiveness of civil society relative to formal politics.

The second half of the paper dives deeper into civil society, both analyzing why many non-Islamist Tunisian youth have chosen to participate in civil society instead of politics and the implications of “too much civil society, too little politics”¹⁴ for Tunisian democracy, arguing that the absence of non-Islamist youth from the political scene is dangerous and impedes the ability of Tunisia to fully

consolidate its democratic progress. I also explain how the Tunisian case can be applied to other transitioning (or fully democratic) countries, noting that the phenomenon of citizen disengagement from politics is increasing globally. The paper concludes with a series of policy recommendations for the Tunisian government as well as for the international community to help the Tunisian government attract youth to both participate in formal politics and better partner with their political leaders. This research not only helps us understand individual decision-making, but also the interplay of the regime and the individual, of civil society and the state, to better explain the role of civil society vis-à-vis the state in the post-Arab Spring environment.

The role of civil society in a democratic transition

Before delving further into the Tunisian puzzle, it is important to understand the role that civil society is expected to play in a country transitioning to democracy. Scholars disagree on the definition of the term “civil society.” While some include political parties in the definition of civil society,¹⁵ I am differentiating between *political* society and *civil* society. As it is described in this paper, civil society refers to formal organizations and informal networks that are separate from the state, family, and market; are self-governing; and are voluntary.¹⁶ Civil society can serve in both advocacy and developmental roles. The primary goal of development organizations (DCSOs) is improving the human development of the citizens of the state. And while they may be involved in advocacy, they are not explicitly concerned with democratization.¹⁷ DCSOs serve an important purpose by building social cap-

13 Huntington, Samuel, and Joan Nelson. 1976. *No Easy Choice: Political Participation in Developing Countries*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

14 The phrase “Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics” comes from Vickie Langohr’s article of the same name. Langohr, Vickie. 2004. “Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics: Egypt and Liberalizing Arab Regimes.” *Comparative Politics* 181-204.

15 See, for example Carothers, Thomas. 1999–2000. “Civil Society: Think Again.” *Foreign Policy* 18-29.

16 This definition is based largely on the definition of the “nonprofit sector” favored by Salamon and Anheier. Salamon, Lester M. and Helmut K. Anheier. 1997. *Defining the Nonprofit Sector*. New York: Manchester University Press.

17 For more on DCSOs see Yerkes, S. E. 2012. *Pluralism, Co-optation and Capture: Navigating the Civil Society Arena in the Arab World (doctoral dissertation)*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University.

ital and by providing services that the government is unable or unwilling to provide. However, this paper is concerned with the advocacy-oriented organizations and individuals that shape policy by explicitly advocating for a particular cause or policy on behalf of groups of citizens. This role was most famously described by Alexis de Tocqueville, who called civil society organizations “schools” for democracy, that work by training citizens in civic engagement and political participation, and offering important skills for interest aggregation and articulation.¹⁸

Scholars tend to agree that civil society serves an essential role during the democratic consolidation period that Tunisia is currently experiencing. As Larry Diamond argues, elites (political leaders) have a “preeminent impact in determining whether new democracies become stable, effective and consolidated.”¹⁹ But, elites alone cannot ensure a successful democratic transition. Rather, the “mass public matters for democratization in two senses: in its often pivotal role in helping to effect a transition to democracy, and in the never-ending quest to deepen democracy beyond its formal structure.”²⁰ Linz and Stepan, experts on democratic consolidation, argue that civil society is “invaluable” to the entire democratization process: “A robust civil society, with the capacity to generate political alternatives and to monitor government and state can help transitions get started, help resist reversals, help push transitions to their completion, help consolidate, and help deepen democracy.”²¹

One of most important roles of civil society is to serve as a watchdog, “monitoring, and restraining the exercise of power by formally democratic states and holding them accountable to the law and

public expectations of responsible government.”²² Additionally, civil society can encourage political participation and teach citizens both their rights and responsibilities within a democratic society as well as how to most effectively advocate for change. A “consolidated democracy” can only occur if the following five conditions exist: the development of a “free and lively civil society;” a “relatively autonomous and valued political society;” rule of law to guarantee freedom and “independent associational life;” a “usable state bureaucracy;” and “an institutionalized economic society.”²³ Thus, civil society cannot, by itself, consolidate democracy. Civil society needs an effective partner—strong yet responsive political actors who secure a minimal level of respect from the citizenry. Thus, democratization should be understood as an ongoing struggle with two essential elements—a robust and independent civil society and effective political institutions.

A history of civil society in Tunisia

The history of civil society in Tunisia is relatively short. Under Tunisia’s first post-independence leader, Habib Bourguiba, civil society was governed by Law No. 59-154 of November 7, 1959. This law “did more than simply prevent the development of civil society, but actually strove to infiltrate it, make it a vassal, a sounding board of the regime.”²⁴ The Ministry of Interior was authorized to approve the creation of an association and operated with tremendous discretion, providing associations little legal recourse. Amendments to the associations law passed under Ben Ali, Organic Laws no. 88-90 of August 2, 1988 and 92-95 of April 2, 1992, slightly eased the CSO registration process, but introduced harsher restrictions on the activities of civil society and maintained the provision that allowed the Ministry of Interior complete discretion over dissolving CSOs without a judicial pro-

18 Quoted in Skocpol, Theda. 1997. “The Tocqueville Problem: Civic Engagement in American Democracy.” In *Social Science History* 21 (4): 455-479.

19 Diamond, Larry. 1999. *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 219.

20 Ibid.

21 Linz, Juan J. and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 9.

22 Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, p. 239.

23 Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, p. 7.

24 Foundation for the Future. 2013. “Study on Civil Society Organizations in Tunisia.”

cess. As Beissinger et al. note, “The Ben Ali regime chose . . . to curb civil society activity through harassment, repression, and co-optation, bringing all kinds of interest intermediation under tighter state control.”²⁵

Notably, Tunisia has seen two large upticks in the creation of associations—first in 1988 and 1989, following the ouster of President Bourguiba when Ben Ali “flirted with political liberalism,”²⁶ and second in 2011 and 2012, following the revolution. In the first case, an average of 1,750 associations per year were created (compared to 75 per year from 1980 to 1987) when Tunisians believed Ben Ali had opened up the political space for good, only to see a dramatic crackdown on civil society during the remaining 20 years of Ben Ali’s rule.²⁷ However, most of these associations (89 percent in 1988 and 83 percent in 1989) were “associations for the action and development of primary schools,” with no advocacy focus.²⁸ Furthermore, almost all CSOs created during the Ben Ali regime were co-opted by the state. On the eve of the revolution there were only 10 independent CSOs, groups that advocated for human rights and women’s rights, and labor and professional organizations.

Following the revolution, about 2,500 associations per year were created (compared to 191 per year from 2000 to 2010) when the revolution truly did open the political space and a new associations law (Decree-Law No. 88 of September 24, 2011) significantly relaxed the rules for starting an association and transferring authority over CSO registration from the Ministry of the Interior to the General Secretariat of the Government.²⁹ This second

boom of associational creation differed dramatically from the earlier boom both in substance and geography. The organizations created post-2011 set out to tackle a wide spectrum of issues including human rights, gender issues, development, censorship, and corruption with a large crop of groups dedicated to issues related to democratization—working on issues such as transparency, citizen engagement, democracy promotion, and advocating for greater freedom.³⁰ And while many were still focused on the coast, new networks of associations developed in the South (Gafsa and Medenine) as well as the interior (Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, and Kairouan).³¹

Today, the relationship between civil society and the state is still progressing. While there traditionally was no role for government-civil society dialogue, this changed dramatically following the revolution. Most notably during the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) process, which contained a formal mechanism for civil society engagement including a six-member committee responsible for relations with civil society and the issuance of invitations for civil society to participate in drafting the constitution. Civil society was instrumental in the development of the associations law, ensuring the final law included the concerns of those most impacted by it. Civil society has also been vocal in pushing back against the proposed economic reconciliation law and the police law. Additionally, the 2015 U.S.-Tunisia Strategic Dialogue included, for the first time in the Middle East, a separate civil society dialogue session, the outcome of which was formally incorporated into the bilateral dialogue.

While CSOs were largely ineffective and constrained under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the history of Tunisia’s protest movement is more complex. During the 1990s, until Ben Ali consolidated his authoritarian rule in 2000, most protest activity

25 Beissinger, Mark R., Amaney A. Jamal, and Kevin Mazur. 2015. “Explaining Divergent Revolutionary Coalitions, Regime Strategies and the Structuring of Participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions.” In *Comparative Politics* 48 (1): pp. 1-24.

26 Chomiak, Laryssa. 2014. “Architecture of Resistance in Tunisia.” In *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*, by Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust, 22-51. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

27 Foundation for the Future. 2013. “Study on Civil Society Organizations in Tunisia.”

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 The largest group of new associations created after the revolution is charitable and relief associations (22.6 percent) while rights-related groups (including human rights, citizenship and women’s rights groups) make up 11.4 percent. Ibid.

31 Ibid.

occurred in informal spaces such as cafes, soccer stadiums, and beer halls.³² But as the decade preceding the revolution wore on, Tunisians became increasingly frustrated with their government and began larger, more organized protests. Initially, activists would either use government-sanctioned protests (such as pro-Palestine or anti-Iraq war protests) to subtly critique the government or more overtly use cyber-activism as a way to circumvent the state and mobilize others.³³ But beginning in 2005, activists took bolder action beginning, ironically, with the 2005 World Internet Freedom Conference, hosted in Tunis. Angry at the Ben Ali regime's attempt to conceal its crackdown on internet freedom, Tunisian activists took to the internet to organize. This was followed a few years later, in 2008, by protests in Gafsa, Redeyef and Metlaoui over economic grievances. Bloggers and other activists shared news of the 2008 protests across the internet, both encouraging others (including human rights CSOs, journalists, and lawyers) to join the protests, but also showing Tunisians across the country that there was a living and active protest culture.

One of the boldest protest attempts prior to the revolution was the May 2010 Tunis in White protest, organized on Facebook, calling on Tunisians to dress in white and have coffee on Avenue Habib Bourguiba to protest internet censorship. While the protest ultimately failed when the Tunisian government shut down the Facebook page and dispersed and arrested some of the protesters, the resulting Facebook discussions on freedom of expression and political participation were clear precursors to the revolution.³⁴ The lesson of this type of protest activity was two-fold—first, people around the world (including those in the Tunisian diaspora) paid attention and voiced support for the protest activity; and second, there was strength in numbers. So when the revolution began, many of the Tunisian activists already had experience using social media to broadcast their activity and gener-

ate the support necessary for mass protest. As Beissinger et al. note, the strength and size of the protests eventually allowed the formal union organizations, the largest opposition group in Tunisia, to throw their support behind the revolution.³⁵

32 Chomiak, "Architecture of Resistance in Tunisia."

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Beissinger, Jamal, and Mazur, "Explaining Divergent Revolutionary Coalitions."

Why does youth participation matter?

Youth participation matters primarily because of the large size of the youth population in Tunisia (and across the Arab world). Sixty percent of Tunisians are under 35, meaning that the youth population has the potential to dramatically impact Tunisian politics, should they choose to participate.³⁶

Additionally, the youth, who were largely responsible for bringing about the 2011 revolution, have failed to reap its benefits to a greater extent than their parents and grandparents, leaving many disgruntled and disenchanted with their political leaders. The Tunisian revolution was driven primarily by economic inequality. Youth unemployment has long been a problem in the MENA region, where the rate of unemployment for youth is four times as high as for other age groups.³⁷ Five years after the revolution, in which some Tunisian youth watched their friends fight and die for a better life, 40 percent of all youth are still unemployed. Even worse, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), half of university graduates under 35 are unemployed and it takes university graduates an average of six years to find a stable job.³⁸ Furthermore, according to the Tunisian government's own statistics, one million youth are considered "NEET"—no employment, education, or training.³⁹ This is a staggeringly high number in a country of 11.2 million people. The reasons for the disproportionately high level

of youth unemployment in Tunisia are complex.⁴⁰ They include a mismatch between education and labor, leaving educated youth unprepared for the workforce; regional disparities between the coast and interior leading to economic and political marginalization of youth from the interior; lack of access to financing and business training for entrepreneurs; and a lack of youth-friendly services.

A second reason why it is important to understand youth participation is that youth who are less civically-engaged may be more likely to participate in activity that is against the interests of the state including strikes or protests, joining terrorist groups, or emigrating. Tunisia has also seen high suicide rates, particularly among unemployed university graduates.⁴¹ Even shortly after the revolution, some analysts voiced concern over the lack of youth participation in formal politics. One report states, "although youth were the driving force behind the protests that removed Ben Ali from power, they are conspicuously absent from the political scene during the transition. . . . If youth continue to feel marginalized politically, there is a risk that they may return to the streets to voice their grievances, creating social unrest and challenging the legitimacy of the elected assembly."⁴² January 2016, the five year anniversary of the revolution, coincided with a wave of protests across Tunisia by unemployed youth "who were angry that five years on from the revolution in which they played such

36 National Democratic Institute. 2014. "Final Report on the 2014 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia." Washington, DC.

37 Hoffman, Michael, and Amaney Jamal. 2014. "Political Attitudes of Youth Cohorts." In *The Arab Uprisings Explained*, by Marc Lynch, 273-295. New York: Columbia University Press.

38 Karasapan, Omer. "Toward a New Social Contract in Tunisia." *Future Development (blog)*. October 27, 2015. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/future-development/posts/2015/10/27-new-social-contract-tunisia-karasapan>.

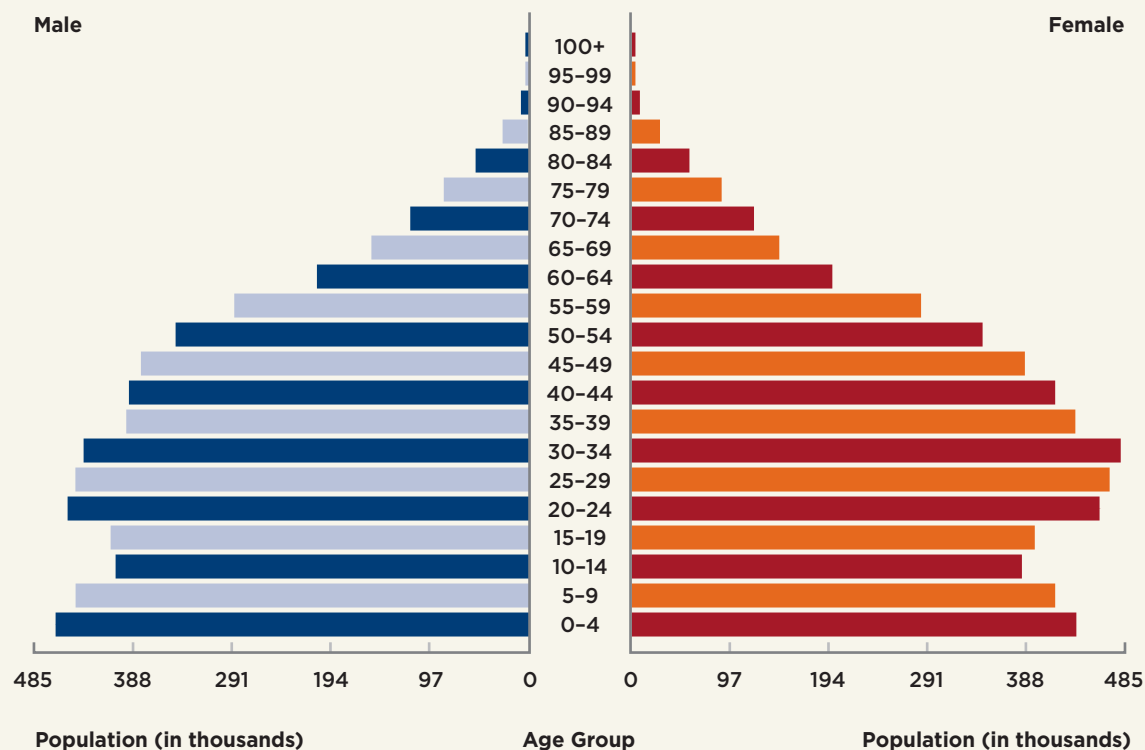
39 Interview with Tunisian government official. Tunis. June 2016.

40 For a thorough examination of the issue of youth unemployment and exclusion see The World Bank Group. 2014. "Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion."

41 Younes, Najwa. "Suicide Rates Among Tunisia's Young Adults Top 2015 Statistics." *Tunisia Live*. July 8, 2016. <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2016/07/28/suicide-rates-among-tunisias-young-adults-top-2015-statistics/>.

42 McCurdy, Daphne. 2011. "A Guide to the Tunisian Elections." Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Democracy.

FIGURE 2. Tunisia's population pyramid



Source: CIA World Factbook

an active part, nothing appears to have changed in their material conditions.”⁴³

Tunisia expert Olfa Lamoulou has argued that “the experience of economic exclusion can lead to disenchantment and disengagement, generating potential for extremism.”⁴⁴ Robert Worth noted, “The brief, ecstatic moment of unity in 2011 in Tahrir Square (and its equivalents elsewhere) made the subsequent return to those same old frustrations all the more painful—and left some of the Arab world’s idealists open to the lure of a false dawn.”⁴⁵

Unfortunately this has borne out in Tunisia, which supplies the Islamic State (ISIS) with more foreign fighters than any other country across the globe, with current estimates between 6,000-7,000 in sum, as of November 2015.⁴⁶ One study of two Tunis suburbs with high youth unemployment and large numbers of ISIS fighters found that “young people are turning to their local neighborhoods more than ever, as the only basis on which they can build links with political or civil society groups. Even then, there is little on offer except charity-based groups, which are most prevalent, followed by Salafist groups.”⁴⁷

43 Civicus. 2016. “State of Civil Society Report 2016.” <http://www.civicus.org/images/documents/SOCS2016/summaries/SoCS-full-review.pdf>.

44 Ibid.

45 Worth, Robert F. “The Democracy Activist Who Became a Suicide Bomber.” *The Wall Street Journal*. April 7, 2016. http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-democracy-activist-who-became-a-suicide-bomber-1460048520?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2AMideast%20Brief.

46 The Soufan Group. December 2015. “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq.” http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

47 Lamoulou, Olfa. 2016. *Politics on the margins in Tunisia: Vulnerable young people in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen*. London: International Alert.

Tunisia has also seen a rise in the number of emigrants since the revolution. In 2012, the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recorded more than 1.2 million Tunisians living abroad (or more than 11 percent of the country's total population). This was a 3 percent increase from a decade earlier.⁴⁸ Statistics for irregular migrants are likely much higher. Tunisia's proximity to Europe has long led to significant numbers of irregular migrants transiting Tunis—both Tunisians and others in North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Most troubling, a recent survey by the Arab Barometer found that more than half of Tunisians aged 18 to 24 want to emigrate from their country, compared to just 13 percent of those aged 35 and above.⁴⁹

48 Natter, Katherina. "Revolution and Political Transition in Tunisia: A Migration Game Changer?" *Migration Policy Institute*. May 28, 2015. <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/revolution-and-political-transition-tunisia-migration-game-changer>.

49 Arab Barometer Wave IV data. Robbins, Michael. 2016. *Tunisia Five Years After the Revolution*. Washington, DC: Arab Barometer.

What does participation look like?

The low level of youth participation is most striking in the voting booth. While youth turnout was low compared to older generations in both elections, there was a significant drop off from 2011 to 2014.⁵⁰

However a study by the Observatoire National de la Jeunesse (ONJ), a Tunisian government body, and the World Bank found that only about half of people under 30 voted in the 2011 elections.⁵¹ This is compared to an overall voter turnout of 86 percent.⁵² During the same elections, the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) election observation team found "a high abstention rate among youth, making them a priority target for political contestants in 2014."⁵³ This is confirmed by the AfroBarometer, which found that 55 percent of those under 29 said they voted in the 2011 elections compared to 72 percent of those aged 30 to 49 and 78 percent of those aged 50 and above.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the World Values Survey (WVS) found that two-thirds of Tunisians of all age groups stated that they believe elections play an important role

in their family's economic situation.⁵⁵ Thus, Tunisians understand that elections can have a direct impact on their personal lives, yet young Tunisians, in particular, still choose to abstain from voting.

In 2014, many youth who had voted in 2011 chose to boycott the elections, feeling both disconnected from the political system and disappointed in the failure of Tunisia's first democratically-elected government to achieve the demands of the revolution, with some groups estimating that 80 percent of eligible Tunisian voters aged 18 to 25 boycotted the 2014 parliamentary elections.⁵⁶ Overall voter turnout was 66 percent for the 2014 parliamentary elections and 59 percent for the second round of the presidential elections. As Achraf Aouadi, president of the Tunisian NGO iWatch said in the lead up to the 2014 elections, "So many people will be boycotting because they don't see themselves in the projects of either of the candidates."⁵⁷ Wissem Missaoui, director of youth programs at the Tunisian branch of the international NGO Search for Common Ground, noted low youth participation across the country, stating, "It was clear [the youth] were really not interested in participating [in the 2014 elections]."⁵⁸ This finding was confirmed by multiple election observation teams from different organizations.⁵⁹ The Carter Center, which deployed an elections observation mission, also noted the low youth voter registration stating that "those at the

50 Much of the data on voter participation is imperfect. The Tunisian elections authority (ISIE) has not released data on voter turnout by age, thus the data in this section is based on post-fact questioning, which tends to be inflated. Additionally, at the time of this writing, much of the data on voter turnout was not available by religiosity. Thus, the data refers to all youth—secular and Islamist. However, when comparing the AfroBarometer data for 2014, which is broken down by level of religiosity, to other data sources for the same election, the trends are the same for secular and Islamist youth. That is, both groups of youth tend to display the same voting behavior, relative to older secular and religious Tunisians.

51 The World Bank Group. 2011. "Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion." The report notes that 47.4 percent of rural men and 48.4 percent of rural women under 30 and 52.9 percent of urban men and 51.5 percent of urban women under 30 voted in 2011.

52 International IDEA. "Voter Turnout Data for Tunisia." <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=220>.

53 National Democratic Institute. 2014. "Final Report on the 2014 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia." Washington, DC.

54 AfroBarometer Wave V data.

55 World Values Survey database. <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

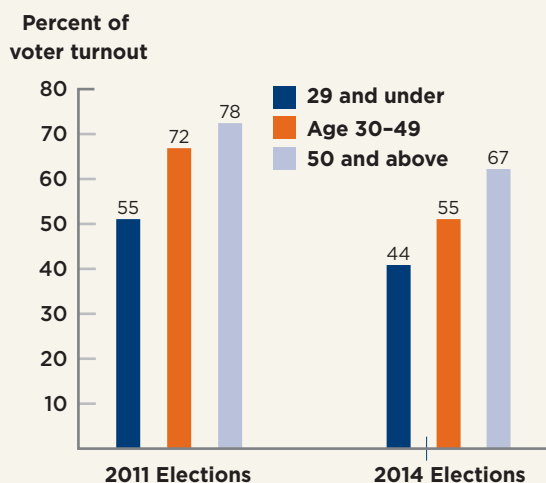
56 Global Network for Rights and Development & International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights. 2014. "Joint Observation Mission to Tunisian Parliamentary Elections 2014: Report."

57 Reidy, Eric. "Tunisian youth skip presidential vote." *Al Monitor*. November 25, 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/tunisia-presidential-elections-low-youth-turnout.html#ixzz4IBIS1ILS>

58 Ibid.

59 National Democratic Institute. 2014. "Final Report on the 2014 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia." Washington, DC; Global Network for Rights and Development & International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights, "Joint Observation Mission."

FIGURE 3. Voter turnout by age, 2011 and 2014 elections



source: AfroBarometer

forefront of the revolution risk being sidelined in the political and civil affairs of their country.”⁶⁰ The AfroBarometer found that 48 percent of secular youth (29 and under) said they voted in the 2014 elections, compared to 58 percent of those 30 to 49 and 67 percent of those 50 and above.⁶¹ The Arab Barometer, when polling about voter turnout after the elections, found that only 33 percent of Tunisian youth stated that they voted in the 2014 parliamentary elections (compared to 58 percent of older generations).⁶² To put these numbers in perspective, according to the WVS, only 12.7 percent of Tunisian youth say they “always” vote in national elections compared to 41.1 percent of Egyptians, 35.6 percent of Americans, 65.4 percent of Swedes, and 77.9 percent of Brazilians.⁶³

Interestingly, though, despite low voting numbers, youth chose to participate in the election process as observers, poll watchers, and polling station officials.⁶⁴ As NDI’s report observed, “Young people were the engines behind most electoral campaigns. Youth played visible roles in staffing campaign venues, replacing destroyed posters, interacting with potential voters, participating in rallies and automobile processions, and distributing flyers.”⁶⁵

Outside of elections, youth participation in politics is equally low. The ONJ found in 2013 that only 2.7 percent of youth were members of political parties and less than 19 percent expressed a preference for a particular party, signaling the clear disconnection of young people from formal politics.⁶⁶ The WVS found similar results as only 1.7 percent of youth (defined as 29 and under) identified as members of a political party.⁶⁷ While older age groups were more likely than youth to identify as a member of a political party in the World Values Survey, overall 98 percent of Tunisians surveyed said they were not members of a political party, meaning that Tunisian participation in political parties is quite low overall.⁶⁸

But while youth are participating in formal politics to a lesser extent than older generations, they express interest in politics to a *greater* degree. According to the WVS, 45 percent of those under 29 are “very interested” or “somewhat interested” in politics, compared to 42 percent of those aged 30 to 49 or 37 percent of those 50 and above.⁶⁹ Thus, Maha Yahya argues: “the youth in particular are growing more and more disengaged from active

60 The Carter Center. 2014. “Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia: A Final Report.” https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/tunisia-final-rpt-2014-elections.pdf.

61 AfroBarometer Wave VI data. The survey did not differentiate between the parliamentary and presidential elections. As a proxy for “secular,” I use an average of the two lowest levels religious practice—never practice religion or practice religion a few times a year.

62 Arab Barometer Wave IV data.

63 World Values Survey database.

64 National Democratic Institute. 2014; Interview with Tunisian election observer. Tunis. June 2016; Interview with international election observer. Washington, DC. April 2015.

65 National Democratic Institute. 2014. “Final Report on the 2014 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia.” Washington, DC.

66 Lamloum, Olfa. 2016. *Politics on the margins in Tunisia: Vulnerable young people in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen*. London: International Alert.

67 World Values Survey database.

68 Ibid; The Arab Barometer found that 1.9 percent of youth identified as a member of a political party with 2.21 percent of older generations. Arab Barometer Wave IV data.

69 World Values Survey database.

participation in political life. This young generation of Tunisians is seeking ways to express itself politically yet is actively avoiding do so through institutional instruments, including mainstream political parties and civil society associations.”⁷⁰ But this statement is not entirely accurate. Tunisian youth are avoiding formal political structures, such as political parties, but they are participating in informal politics—via civil society organizations, protests, and informal networks—to a greater degree than older generations. This is clear in civil society participation. While only 5 percent of those aged 35 and above are members of a civil society group, that number is 11 percent for youth.⁷¹ These numbers may seem low—globally participation in civil society is much smaller than voter turnout. The important point is not whether, on balance, larger numbers of people are participating in civil society than politics, but rather understanding the behavior of the revolutionaries—young activists who fought for political freedom only to turn away from formal politics.

The dichotomy between youth and older generations is apparent in other forms of informal political activity as well. 13 percent of youth said they have participated in a meeting or signed a petition compared to 9.5 percent of older generations, and 21 percent of youth said they have participated in a protest, march or sit-in, compared to less than 10 percent of those 35 and above.⁷² The AfroBarometer found similar results, with a clear trend of increased youth participation in civil society from 2013 to 2015. For example, three times as many people 29 and under said they were a member of a voluntary association in 2015 compared to 2011.⁷³

Looking only at secular participation in informal politics, the trends are similar: only 28 percent of secular youth (15-29) said they would never participate in a community meeting, compared to 34 percent of those aged 30-49 and 40 percent of those 50 and above.⁷⁴ And while 50 percent of secular youth (15-29) said they would never participate in a protest or demonstration, the numbers were much higher for older groups—60 percent of those aged 30-49 and 78 percent of those aged 50 and above.⁷⁵ Globally, outside the Arab world, it is more common for older generations to have participated in a peaceful demonstration than youth. When comparing Tunisian youth to young people in other transitioning countries and democracies, Tunisian youth are about as likely as others to have participated in informal politics, including attending a peaceful demonstration or participating in a boycott.⁷⁶ More than 14 percent of Tunisian youth have participated in a demonstration, slightly above the average in comparison to other “free” countries of 12 percent.⁷⁷ And 3.3 percent of Tunisian youth have participated in a boycott, compared to 5.4 percent, on average, of young people in “free” countries.

The Tunisian government is aware of the low levels of youth participation and is attempting, albeit ineffectively, to bring youth into the formal political sphere. During the 2014 campaign period, the the Tunisian election authority (ISIE) extended the voter registration period twice, first by one week and then by an additional three weeks to encourage youth (as well as women and those who had voted in 2011 but not yet registered for the 2014 elections) to register. Nevertheless, youth participation remained staggeringly low. And after the first round of the presidential election ISIE announced low youth representation among registered voters, causing some

70 Yahya, Maha. 2016. *Great Expectations in Tunisia*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

71 Arab Barometer Wave IV data.

72 Ibid.

73 AfroBarometer Wave V and Wave VI data. In the survey conducted in January-February 2013, 3.6 percent of those 15 to 29 said they were a member of a voluntary association, while in the survey conducted in April-May 2015, 11.4 percent of those 15 to 29 said they were a member of a voluntary association.

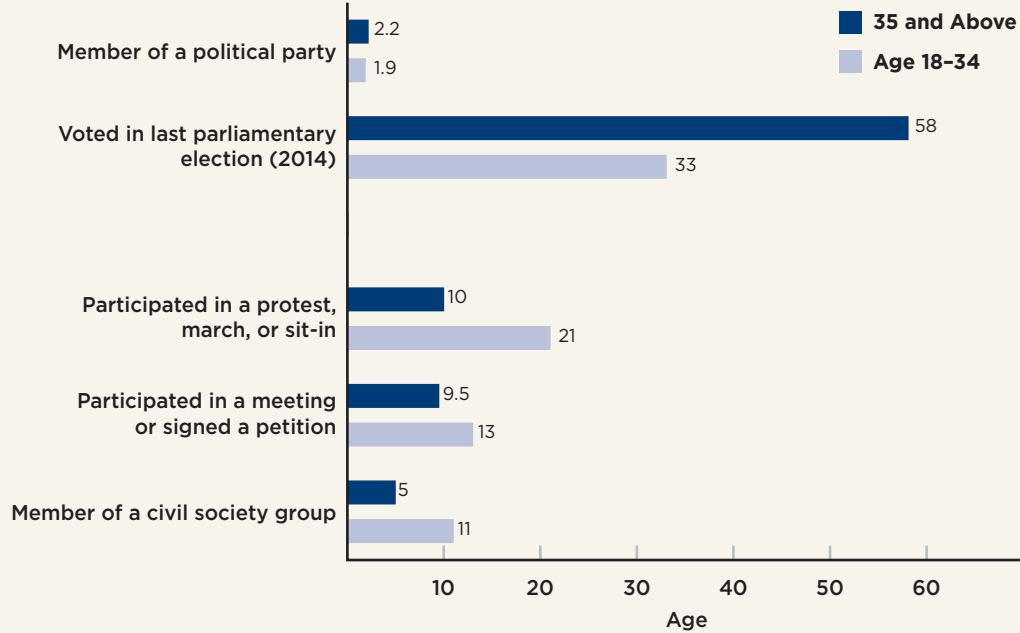
74 AfroBarometer Wave VI data. As a proxy for “secular,” I use an average of the two lowest levels religious practice—never practice religion or practice religion a few times a year.

75 Ibid.

76 World Values Survey database.

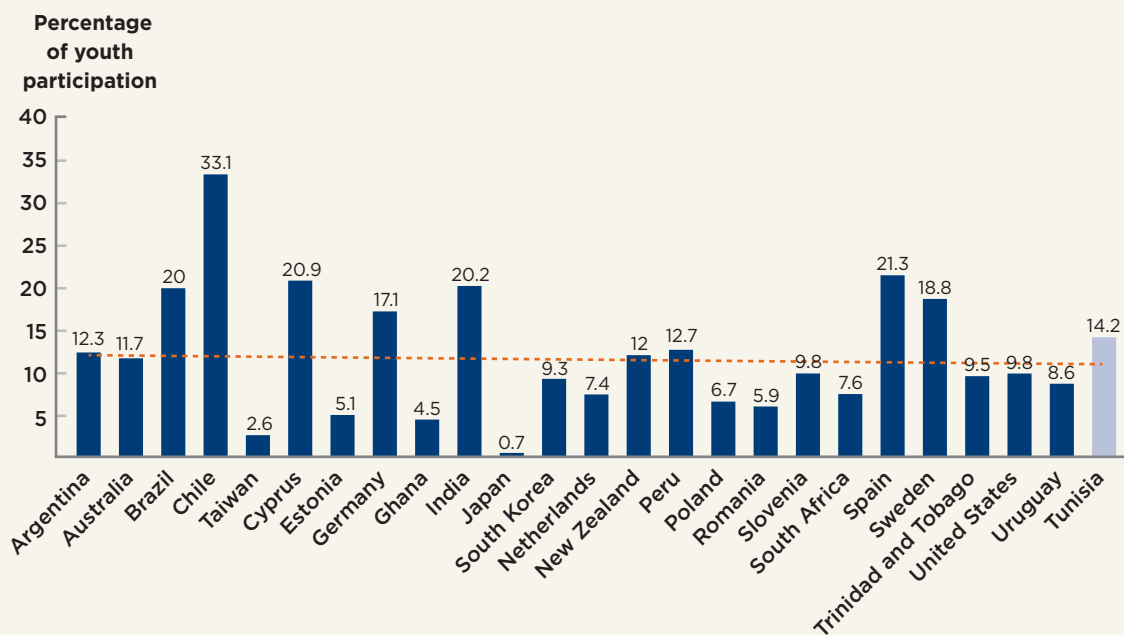
77 “Free” refers to the Freedom House “Freedom in the World” categorization.

FIGURE 4. Formal and informal participation in politics by age



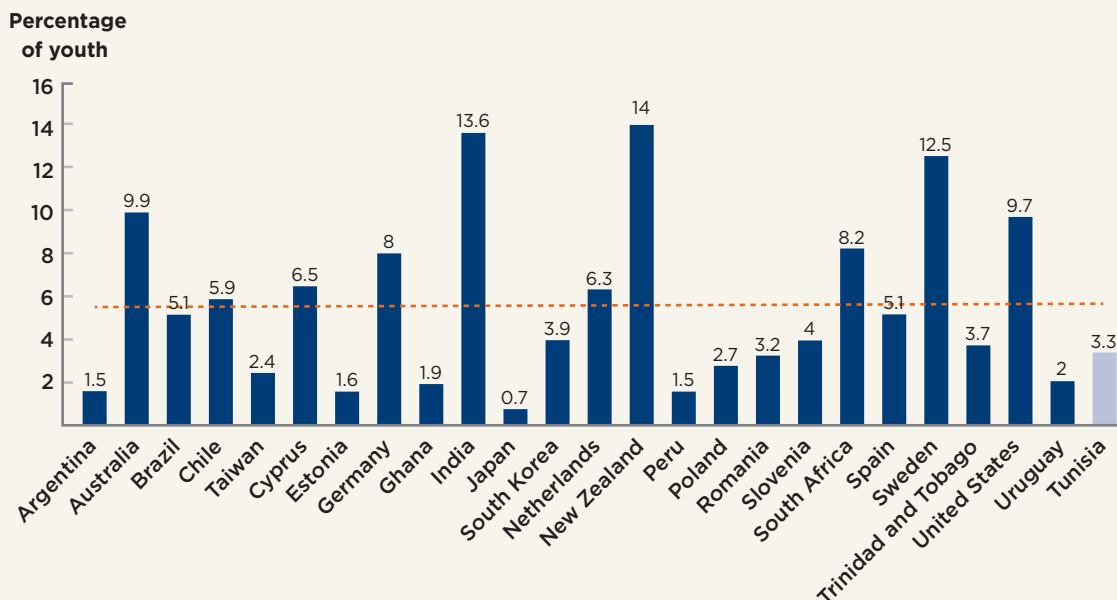
Source: Arab Barometer.

FIGURE 5. Percentage of youth (under 30) in transitioning states and democracies who say they have participated in a peaceful demonstration



Source: World Values Survey

FIGURE 6. Percentage of youth (under 30) in transitioning states and democracies who say they have participated in a boycott



Source: World Values Survey.

CSOs to adopt campaigns to encourage youth participation in the second round of the election.⁷⁸

The Ministry of Youth and Sports has set a strategic goal of encouraging youth participation in Tunisia's first municipal elections, expected to be held by the end of 2017, and making youth active participants in the political process.⁷⁹ However, most youth with whom I spoke were pessimistic about the prospects of the municipal elections to bring real change and were not planning to participate in these elections to any greater degree than the national elections.

As an additional measure to include youth voices in the political system, the Tunisian government passed a provision in the electoral law in 2014 that can be understood as a youth quota of sorts. In order to receive full public campaign financing, candidate lists must include someone under 35 within the first four places on their list. There is no penalty for failing to adhere to the law and no incentive for including additional youth, beyond one person in the top four spots. The result of which is that despite the youth provision, only 37 MPs under 40 were elected to the 2014 parliament (17 percent of the 217 seat body), only a slight increase over the pre-revolutionary parliament in which 14 percent of the members of the House of Deputies and none of the members of the House of Councilors were under 40.⁸⁰

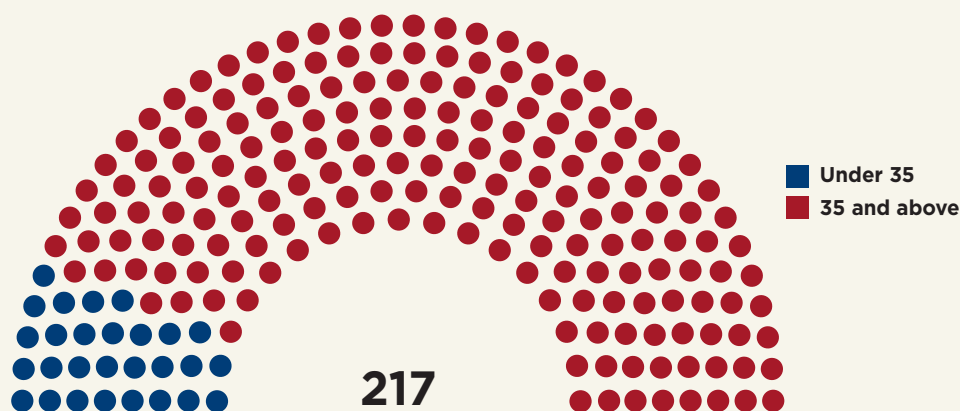
And because very few candidate lists included youth in the top position, some questioned the sin-

78 According to the ISIE, young people under 21 represented only 4.59 percent of all registered voters while those under 30 barely reached 20 percent. The Carter Center. 2014. "Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia: A Final Report." https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/tunisia-final-rpt-2014-elections.pdf.

79 Interview with Tunisian government official. Tunis. June 2016.

80 Inter-Parliamentary Union.

FIGURE 7. Members of parliament by age, 2014 elections



Source: Observatoire National de Jeunesse.

cerity of the quota. The Tunisian parliament also has the most progressive gender parity law in the region, requiring party lists to alternate between men and women on their electoral list. As a result, Tunisia's parliament is comprised of 35 percent women, well above pre-revolutionary levels, making Tunisia among the top performing countries in the world.⁸¹ As this shows, electoral quotas have worked in Tunisia to increase gender parity, but have failed to do so to increase youth participation.

Youth also perceive a very limited space for themselves within political parties. As the ONJ found, "The fact that so few were actually elected proved to young people that the system privileged older people in spite of the law."⁸² One young activist I interviewed said that youth are put at the bottom of the list so they have no real chance to win, calling the quotas a "symbolic measure."⁸³ Furthermore, "the lack of openness among established parties and the striking of deals behind closed doors ran contrary

to the principles of fairness and transparency, excluding the very generation that had brought about political change."⁸⁴ This attitude leads many youth to see the revolution as "co-opted by the 'old' and established politicians."⁸⁵ According to the WVS, 68 percent of youth believe "old people have too much political influence" compared to just 49 percent of those aged 50 and above.⁸⁶

In an environment where there is little faith in public institutions, youth views are even more pessimistic. The Arab Barometer's 2016 survey found that only 23 percent of youth have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in the government, compared to 40 percent of those aged 35 and above.⁸⁷ And less than 14 percent of youth have confidence in parliament, compared to 23 percent of those 35 and above.⁸⁸ A staggeringly low 7 percent of Tunisian youth express trust in political parties, compared to 15 percent of older generations.⁸⁹ Furthermore, 77 percent of Tunisians who supported the revolu-

81 In 1990, the parliament had 4.3 percent women, in 2000 11.5 percent, in 2010 27.6 percent. World Bank "World Development Indicators."

82 The World Bank Group. 2014. "Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion."

83 Interview with Tunisian civil society activist. Tunis. June 2016.

84 The World Bank Group, "Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion."

85 Ibid.

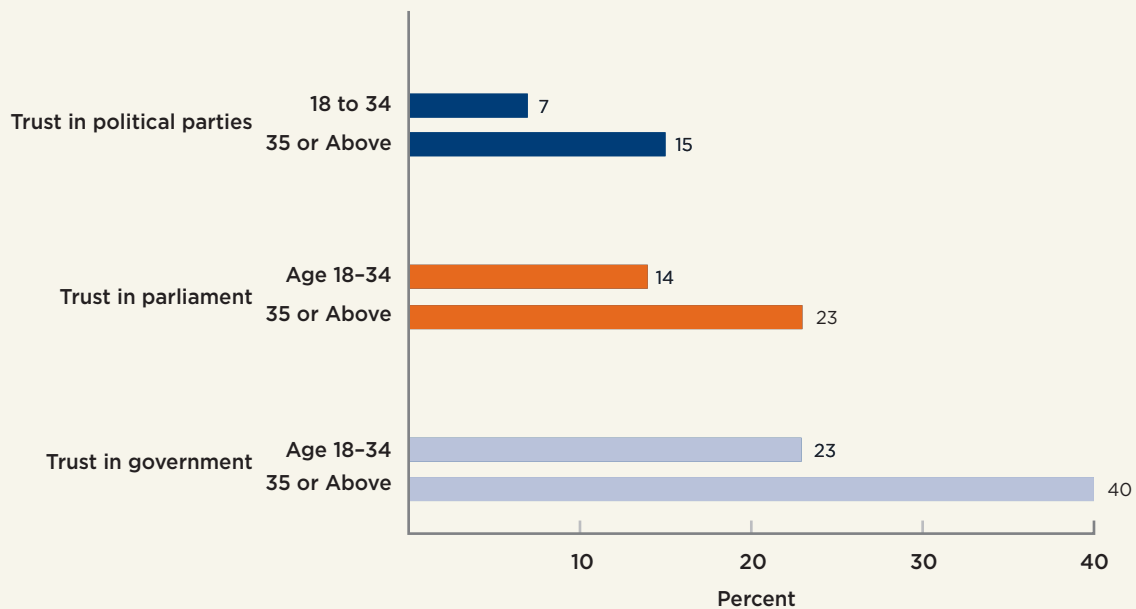
86 World Values Survey database.

87 Arab Barometer Wave IV data.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

FIGURE 8. Trust in government



Source: Arab Barometer.

tion said they are dissatisfied with way government is performing its duties.⁹⁰ And only 38 percent of Tunisian youth believe the economy will improve in three to five years (compared with 54 percent of Tunisians over age 35).⁹¹

90 Abbott, Pamela. 2014. "Have Expectations Been Met? The Evaluation of Supporters of the Arab Uprisings of Political Reforms and Economic Development in 2014." http://www.arabtrans.eu/documents/Have_Expectations_Been_Met_The_Evaluation_Of_Supporters_Of_The_Arab_Uprisings_of_Political_Reforms_and_Economic_Development_In_2014_by_Pamela_Abbott_Arab_Transitions_Presentation_Brussels_22nd_June_201.pdf.

91 Robbins, Michael. 2016. *Tunisia Five Years After the Revolution*. Washington, DC: Arab Barometer.

Why do we expect participation?

Youth political apathy is not unique to Tunisia. Analysis of youth participation across the globe—from the United States to Africa—laments the low level of youth voter turnout, for example.⁹² So why do we expect a different result in Tunisia? The simple answer is because non-Islamist youth overcame apathy to bring about a revolution. While only a small percentage of the Tunisian population participated in the revolution (16 percent), 60 percent of revolutionaries were under 35 and the youngest age group (18 to 24) was overrepresented relative to their share of the population.⁹³ This is not surprising, as the majority of those who participated in the revolution (63 percent) cited the “weak economy” as the primary reason and, as stated above, youth are disproportionately affected by the economy.⁹⁴ Three years after the revolution, in 2014, 85 percent of those who supported the revolution for economic reasons stated that they remained unsatisfied with the way the economy was performing.⁹⁵ Thus, one would expect continued youth political engagement following the revolution since the formal political structures are the main decision-makers regarding the economy.

Additionally, as Marc Lynch notes, the 2011 protests across the region included “actors who had never protested before; this included the urban

middle class, who had previously remained ‘sullenly aloof from political protest,’” suggesting that the revolution was a unique moment that encouraged a form of political activity previously foreign to many Tunisians.⁹⁶ Furthermore, a February 2016 NDI focus group noted the desire of the public to see more youth in political leadership roles. As one respondent stated, “The youth should be in power; they have the right . . . People who are 55 or 60 . . . should leave the place to younger people who are more competent and who are able to make changes.”⁹⁷

We also expected to see youth participation because there was a clear increase in political participation and civic engagement by Tunisians immediately following the revolution. As the political space opened up for the first time, Tunisians across the spectrum created thousands of civil society organizations and 113 political parties that entered the October 2011 elections.⁹⁸ Voter turnout overall, as mentioned above, was 86 percent—higher than the most recent elections in every developed country except Belgium.⁹⁹ A March 2011 International Republican Institute (IRI) poll found that 89 percent of Tunisians said they were likely to vote in the upcoming elections and 82 percent said the current government was very or somewhat likely to address the issues facing Tunisia.¹⁰⁰ This all suggests that the Tunisian public viewed politics positively and saw a role for themselves in the process. Yet, non-

92 Khaled Asma. “Millennials Now Rival Boomers as A Political Force, But Will They Actually Vote?” *NPR*. May 16, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2016/05/16/478237882/millennials-now-rival-boomers-as-a-political-force-but-will-they-actually-vote>; Lekalake, Rorisang. “Apathy among young people stands in the way of Africa’s demographic dividend.” *The Conversation*. August 18, 2016. https://theconversation.com/apathy-among-young-people-stands-in-the-way-of-africa-demographic-dividend-64065?utm_content=buffer0486d&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

93 Beissinger, Mark R., Amaney A. Jamal, and Kevin Mazur. “Explaining Divergent Revolutionary Coalitions, Regime Strategies and the Structuring of Participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions.”

94 Arab Barometer Wave III data.

95 Abbott, “Have Expectations Been Met?”

96 Lynch, Marc. 2014. *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press.

97 Mysliwiec, Anna, and Assil Kedissi. 2016. *Five Years After the Revolution: Tunisian Citizens Express Their Views*. Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute.

98 Chomiak, Laryssa. 2014. “Architecture of Resistance in Tunisia.” Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

99 Desilver, Drew. “U.S. voter turnout trails most developed countries.” *Pew*. August 2, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/02/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>.

100 “Survey of Tunisian Public Opinion.” May 14–27, 2011. http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/flip_docs/Tunisia%202011/HTML/index.html#/9/zoomed.

Islamist Tunisian youth, who just months earlier had accomplished an incredible feat—unseating a leader who had been in power longer than some of them had been alive—chose to abstain from formal politics.

What explains Tunisia's lack of participation?

Disillusionment

There are several possible explanations for the low level of non-Islamist youth participation in formal politics. The most frequently cited explanation is disillusionment or disappointment with the political system. Non-Islamist youth don't participate because they are frustrated with the lack of revolutionary progress and do not see any point in voting or otherwise engaging with formal politics. As a Tunisian government official told me, "Youth are fed up with politics."¹⁰¹ The revolutionaries are disillusioned because they took to the streets to demand change, and while they have seen incredible progress in opening up the political space, that political space has remained largely closed to them. For the general public (as well as the revolutionaries) on the economic front, the main driver of the revolution, conditions for youth have actually gotten worse, not better.

One study found that youth expressed "a common sense of resentment, frustration, deprivation and dereliction," with 44 percent of youth surveyed stating that their daily lives had not improved since the revolution and 46 percent stating that their living conditions had actually deteriorated, placing blame on the political officials.¹⁰² Furthermore, according to a 2016 Transparency International survey, 64 percent of Tunisians believe corruption has gotten worse over the past year and 62 percent believe the government is doing a bad job at fighting corruption.¹⁰³ These perceptions are accurate. While Tunisia's political progress is to be applauded, the country faces several serious economic problems: in-

creasing inflation, rising unemployment, and overall economic deterioration including increasing poverty, and "young people bear the greatest brunt of those challenges."¹⁰⁴

The revolutionaries are particularly frustrated by the fact that they have not been able to reap the benefits of the revolution that they brought about. They expected to see an end to the corruption that plagued the Ben Ali regime and a government in power that would address the economic injustice that brought them into the streets in the first place. But almost six years later, it is clear to many young people that the Tunisian government, with few young people in positions of power, and led by a 90-year-old president, does not prioritize their interests. Non-Islamist youth see a government led by the older generation, many of whom are remnants of the prior regime. As youth expressed to a 2015 NDI focus group, they do not feel their "needs and interests" are represented by their elected officials.¹⁰⁵ But this feeling is shared by young and old. In a recent survey, 69 percent of Tunisians believe parliament is doing "nothing" to address their needs and 53 percent believe the ministries doing are doing "nothing."¹⁰⁶

Many non-Islamist youths were also turned off from politics because of the consensus nature of Tunisia's political evolution following the revolution. As one Tunisian analyst told me, "compromise ended up killing the hopes of each side" who thought they would run the country.¹⁰⁷ Instead, when the troika government was formed (containing Islamists and non-Islamists) both sides felt like

101 Interview with Tunisian government official. Tunis. June 2016.

102 Lamoulou, Olfa. *Politics on the margins in Tunisia: Vulnerable young people in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen*.

103 Transparency International. 2016. "People and Corruption: Middle East & North Africa Survey 2016." https://issuu.com/transparencyinternational/docs/2016_gcb_mena_en?e=2496456/35314511.

104 Yahya, Maha. *Great Expectations in Tunisia*.

105 National Democratic Institute. 2015. *Expectations and Reality: Citizens of Tunisia Express Their Views*. Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute.

106 Center for Insights in Survey Research. 2016. *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians*. Washington, DC: International Republican Institute.

107 Interview with Tunisian analyst. Washington, DC. May 2016.

they were selling out to the other. Secularists, in particular, who had grown up under a staunchly secular state, were hoping for a democratic Tunisia that maintained the secular nature they were accustomed to under Ben Ali, failing to anticipate the strength of the Islamists upon their return to the country. When the parties they supported instead chose to partner with the Islamists and agreed on compromises that allowed a role for Islam in public life, many secularists were turned off from politics. The troika government's composition was not sufficient to cause non-Islamist youth to disengage from politics—they were not particularly excited with the non-Islamist parties prior to the troika. But partnering with Ennahda was a bridge too far for some non-Islamist youth who had already begun to feel disappointment with the failure of non-Islamist parties to quickly and sufficiently address their economic and social concerns.

While the explanation of disillusionment makes logical sense, it only tells part of the story. Disillusionment has a lag effect and while it may be able to explain the lower levels of participation from 2011 to 2014, it cannot explain the low levels of participation even shortly after the revolution. Additionally, disillusionment is not solely a youth phenomenon. While non-Islamist youth may be more disillusioned than older age groups, as many young activists sacrificed and saw their friends sacrifice tremendously to achieve the removal of President Ben Ali, only to end up worse off than before, older Tunisians have also failed to see any economic progress or any serious attempt to address corruption, yet they participate in formal politics in larger numbers than youth.¹⁰⁸

Generational divide

Another possible explanation for low youth participation is the generational divide between young and old. The youth perceive that the older generation does not care about them and perceives them as unqualified to participate in politics. While the youth were less qualified than the oldest generation, who had some practice at politics under Bourguiba, the non-Islamist youth nevertheless expected to play a larger role in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Thus, the generational divide is both a matter of perception and representation. Non-Islamist youth do not believe their issues and concerns are taken seriously by the government and do not see many young people in positions of influence within government. As one young Tunisian told me, youth “feel they are ‘represented’ by people from another generation.”¹⁰⁹

Tunisian youth make up 60 percent of the population, yet they have consistently been disproportionately underrepresented in government. Only 4 percent of the members of the NCA, the body elected in 2011 to draft Tunisia's post-revolution constitution, were under 30 with an additional 18 percent between 30 and 40. Yet no youth representatives were members of the executive bureau of the NCA or in the leadership of the constitution-writing committees.¹¹⁰

President Essebsi, during his campaign in 2014, called for 25 percent representation within government for youth and women, yet only 13 percent of the current parliament was under 35 at the time of the election and the average age of the Essid government was 53.¹¹¹ The recently inaugurated govern-

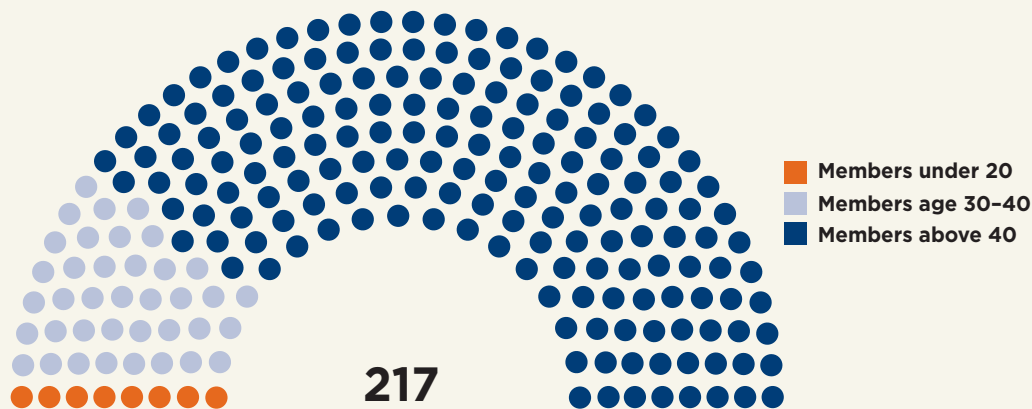
108 For more on the economic issues in Tunisia see Muasher, Marwan, Marc Pierini, and Alexander Djerassi. 2016. *Between Peril and Promise: A New Framework for Partnership with Tunisia*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/tunisia-the-last-arab-spring-country>; Boughzala, Mongi. 2016. “Youth Employment and Economic Transition in Tunisia.” In *The Arab Spring Five Years Later: Case Studies*, by Hafez Ghanem, 153–176. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

109 Interview with Tunisian youth. Tunis. June 2016.

110 Tavana, Daniel and Alex Russell. October 2014. “Previewing Tunisia's Parliamentary & Presidential Elections.” *Project on Middle East Democracy*. <http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Tunisia-Election-Guide-2014.pdf>.

111 The Carter Center. 2014. “Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia: A Final Report.” https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/tunisia-final-rpt-2014-elections.pdf Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda both have around 15% youth representation.

FIGURE 9. Members of the National Constituent Assembly by age



Source: POMED.

ment of 41-year-old Youssef Chahed may change some of this, as will be discussed in the concluding section of the paper, but even Chahed's "young" government has an average age of 49.

Tunisia's level of youth representation in parliament is similar to other transitioning countries and democracies. Globally, the average age of a parliamentarian is 53.¹¹² The average age of the Australian government is 51, with 11.5 percent of legislators under 40. The average age of the U.K. parliament is also 51 and 28 percent of parliamentary candidates in 2015 were under 40. The lower house of parliament in India has 13 percent of its members under 40. In 2014, Sweden elected its youngest parliament in history, with an average age of 41. The Romanian parliament has 20 percent of its members under 40. Notably, in the United States, a mere 6.5 percent of members of Congress are under 40. Nevertheless, the fact that these countries—all democracies without a recent experience of youth-led popular revolution—have similar, if not higher levels of youth representation in formal

government shows that the Tunisian story requires further unpacking.

In a focus group, a 29-year-old expressed a sentiment many young Tunisians feel—the youth are there to be taken advantage of, not taken seriously, by Tunisia's leaders: "No political party cares for the youth except when they take advantage of them to distribute flyers and stuff in return for just a pack of cigarettes and 10 dinars. They have never given them real responsibility for something."¹¹³ One young activist I interviewed agreed, saying that political parties "use and exploit youth."¹¹⁴ And an international civil society actor working in Tunisia told me that "officials see youth as non-credible actors and do not think youth belong" in the political arena.¹¹⁵ This idea was also expressed by an older Tunisian parliamentarian I interviewed, who said that youth do not take politics seriously and are preoccupied by bigger issues such as unemployment, drugs, education, and terrorism.¹¹⁶

112 United Nations Development Programme. *The Global Parliamentary Report*. 2012. http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/parliamentary_development/the-global-parliamentary-report.html.

113 National Democratic Institute. 2015. *Expectations and Reality: Citizens of Tunisia Express Their Views*. Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute.

114 Interview with Tunisian civil society activist. Tunis. June 2016.

115 Interview with international civil society actor. Tunis. June 2016.

116 Interview with Tunisian parliamentarian. Tunis. June 2016.

The leader of a youth-focused NGO described her interaction with the government to me saying that even when her organization has submitted formal inquiries and advocated for youth issues, the parties fail to stand up for youth demands.¹¹⁷ A Tunisian analyst expressed it this way—youth issues resonate in society, so political parties tend to include youth issues (such as reforming Tunisia’s harsh drug laws¹¹⁸ or addressing youth unemployment) in their platforms, trying to cater to the youth vote. However, once elected, the parties fail to take any action on these issues.¹¹⁹ This problem is exacerbated by the fact that because youth do not vote, they are not able to express their discontent with their country’s elected leaders. This leads to a vicious cycle in which political leaders recognize that they will not be held accountable for failing to carry out campaign promises to address youth issues, causing further frustration on the part of non-Islamist youth. Furthermore, while “all decisionmakers support [the idea of] civil society, they want to empower development [organizations] and limit the impact of political CSOs.”¹²⁰

The generational divide is compounded by the paternalistic nature of Tunisian society. As one young activist explained, the revolution represented a unique moment where the youth stepped out of their traditional subservient role to challenge the regime: “Our society is patriarchal [. . .] We always wait for superiors to take decisions and give orders [. . .] I don’t know how in the revolution we broke this rule but then we reverted back to it.”¹²¹ The remnants of the prior regime are everywhere. As Tunisian analyst Haykel Ben Mafoudh noted, “Instead of anchoring public policies within the defined template of freedom, transparency, and rule

of law, the orientation of the political system was enclosed in institutional behavior inherited from the early autocratic era.”¹²²

Furthermore, Tunisian youth were raised by parents who came of age under Ben Ali and were therefore completely shut out of politics. They had no incentive to teach their children about politics and the Tunisian education system under Ben Ali eliminated civics and political science from the curriculum. The oldest generation, however, had some exposure to politics under the Bourguiba regime and were therefore the most experienced political actors following the revolution. The older generation also has a kind of legitimacy that the youth lack. As a Tunisian journalist told me, many members of the older generation were thrown in jail or tortured under Ben Ali, giving them a sense of credibility. They look at the youth and think, “what did they ever do for their country?”¹²³

The older elite have consistently used their experience to sideline the youth, using “exclusionary attitudes and confrontational strategies . . . in their attempts to maximize influence over the political process.”¹²⁴ Several young Tunisians told me that the political parties treat youth like second-class citizens—even making young parliamentarians or government officials take on grunt work while the older officials (technically of equal stature) get all the credit.¹²⁵ Even worse, the Tunisian government has initiated a crackdown on what they term the “marginal elements” of society such as drug users, the hip-hop community, and the LGBT community, all of which are dominated by youth. Whether intentional or not, the youth perceive this crackdown as targeting their demographic.¹²⁶

117 Interview with Tunisian civil society activist. Tunis. June 2016.

118 Following a campaign by Tunisian and international civil society groups, the Tunisian parliament was debating reforming Tunisia’s notoriously harsh drug laws as of this writing.

119 Interview with Tunisian political analyst. Tunis. June 2016.

120 Interview with Tunisian political analyst. Tunis. June 2016.

121 British Council and The American University in Cairo. 2013. *The revolutionary promise: youth perceptions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia*. Cairo: British Council.

122 Mahfoudh, Haykel Ben. “The Tumultuous Transition.” *Cipher Brief*. August 26, 2016. <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/tumultuous-transition-1091>.

123 Interview with Tunisian journalist. Tunis. June 2016.

124 Asseburg, Muriel, and Heiko Wimmen. 2016. “Dynamics of Transformation, Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World.” In *Mediterranean Politics* 21 (1): 1-22.

125 Interview with Tunisian civil society activist. Washington, DC. June 2016.

126 Interview with Tunisian political analyst. Tunis. June 2016.

It is clear that there is a serious divide between the youngest and oldest generations in Tunisia. In comparison to those over 50, twice as many young people said that having a 70-year-old boss would be unacceptable, according to the WVS.¹²⁷ And almost 70 percent of youth said that old people have too much political influence (compared to just 49 percent of those over 50).¹²⁸ However, the perception of age discrimination is insufficient to explain why non-Islamist youth do not participate in formal politics. Because of their demographic weight, non-Islamist youth could band together to form political parties or vote in blocs to elect candidates who best represent their interests. The tradition of patriarchy might explain why non-Islamist youth feel it is not acceptable to challenge their elders, but the fact that non-Islamist youth were able to overcome this constraint to carry out the revolution and the fact that non-Islamist youth continue to engage in protest activity, show that patriarchal traditions are not deeply embedded enough to prevent non-Islamist youth from engaging in political action targeting older members of Tunisia's political elite.

Lack of organization

In addition to disillusionment and patriarchy, another possible explanation for their low participation is that non-Islamist youth were not organized well enough themselves, particularly compared to members of the ancien régime and the Islamists, to take the lead in establishing successful political parties and running the new democracy.¹²⁹ In a 2015 survey by the IRI, respondents listed the lack of training and coaching, money, and opportunity as the top three challenges facing youth political participation today.¹³⁰ While non-Islamist dem-

ocrats were perhaps the least qualified to fill the political vacuum left by the revolutions across the region in an increasingly competitive environment, the non-Islamist youth started from an even greater point of disadvantage on several levels.¹³¹ Because of their younger age, they were naturally inexperienced compared to older generations. Although some of the revolutionaries came from privileged backgrounds, the non-Islamist youth lacked the financial resources to compete with more established political organizations. Additionally, from the beginning, Tunisia's legacy of repression inhibited non-Islamist activists, particularly the younger generation.¹³² Growing up under Ben Ali, the younger generation was both suspicious of formal politics and averse to the leadership structure that political parties and other organizational politics entailed.¹³³ Equating political leadership with authoritarianism, non-Islamist youth were wary of forming the sort of top-down organizations that would have helped them compete in the formal political space against the established Islamist parties and the Bourguibists.

Several scholars have noted the fragmentation of the non-Islamist revolutionaries, which inhibits their ability to develop a coherent political agenda. Marc Lynch, for example, points to the "remarkably inclusive mobilization" of the Arab Spring revolutions, which led to mass numbers of protesters from varying social groups, but also later hurt the possibility of sustaining the protests.¹³⁴ The revolutions created a "façade of unity" that hid the "deep internal cleavages" within Tunisia's non-Islamist

¹²⁷ World Values Survey database.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ See, for example Ghafar, Adel Abdel. "Five years later, lessons of the uprisings in North Africa." *Markaz (blog)*. February 5, 2016. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/02/05-lessons-of-arab-spring-abdelghafar>; Boduszynski, Mieczyslaw P., Kristin Fabbe, and Christopher Lamont. 2015. "Are Secular Parties the Answer?" *Journal of Democracy* 26 (4): 125-139.

¹³⁰ International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey Research. 2015. "Public Opinion Survey

of Tunisians: November 16–November 25, 2015." Washington, DC.

¹³¹ Grand, Stephen R. 2014. *Understanding Tahrir Square: What Transitions Elsewhere Can Teach Us About the Prospects for Arab Democracy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

¹³² Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. 2013. *The Promises of Spring: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in Democratic Transitions*. Beirut: United Nations; Grand, *Understanding Tahrir Square*.

¹³³ Khatib, Lina. 2012-2013. "Political Participation and Democratic Transition in the Arab World." In *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 34 (2): 315-340.

¹³⁴ Lynch, Marc. 2014. *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press.

parties and groups.¹³⁵ Once those cleavages became apparent, after the removal of Ben Ali, many non-Islamist activists were discouraged by the necessity to compromise with those with whom they disagreed, making it extremely difficult to forge a common political agenda. Linz and Stepan note this phenomenon in their study of transitions in Europe and South America: “Many civil society leaders view with antipathy ‘internal conflict’ and ‘division’ within the democratic forces. Institutional routinization, intermediaries, and compromise within politics are spoken of pejoratively.” Yet, they note, all of these things are essential to a successful consolidated democracy.¹³⁶

Furthermore, the skills and motivations necessary to bring people into the street to protest do not necessarily translate to the formal political arena. Revolutions and street protests are far more black and white than politics. As one activist mentioned to me, within civil society “there is no grey area” and “no room for compromise.”¹³⁷ Yet compromise is exactly what is necessary to succeed in politics—both to get onto the ballot in the first place and to pass legislation. As Eva Bellin found, the factors that brought people into the streets in December 2010 were “long-standing grievances, an emotional trigger, a sense of impunity, and access to new social media.”¹³⁸ Each of these factors is helpful in developing one’s political skills—long-standing grievances give you something to fight for; an emotional trigger and sense of impunity creates a desire and willingness to serve; and access to social media gives you the tools to connect with the public. But none of them, or even the four them combined, is a sufficient basis on which to build a successful political career. Most glaringly absent are specificity

and vision.¹³⁹ Although driven by long-standing frustration and anger over economic inequality, corruption, and injustice, the primary achievement of the protests was overturning the power structure and unseating a dictator. Once that goal was accomplished, many of the protesters were left without a clue as to how move forward—how to dismantle existing state structures or establish new ones, how to give a voice to the people who had been silenced for a generation, and how to maintain public support for the revolutionary program beyond the revolution. Asef Bayat explains this most clearly: the “revolutionaries remained outside the centers of power because they were not supposed to seize state power; they were not planning to. When, in the later stages, they realized that they should, they lacked the resources—the kind of organization, powerful leadership and a strategic vision necessary to wrest power from the old regimes or the free riders.”¹⁴⁰

While a lack of experience and political skills clearly contributed to the non-Islamist youth’s inability to seize political power, it does not explain why some of the most capable and well-organized individuals and groups *chose* to stay outside of formal politics. Additionally, some scholars have noted that following the revolution “even informal movements often proved adept at organizing their activism in an enduring fashion under adverse circumstances and at times formed alliances and far-flung networks to compensate for their lack of resources.”¹⁴¹ Thus, the non-Islamist youth *were* able to organize in some circumstances, but tended to be most successful in the civil society arena rather than the political arena. Additionally, a few revolutionaries succeeded in achieving positions of power in 2011, but have since resigned or returned to private life or civil society.

135 Boduszynski, Mieczyslaw P., Kristin Fabbe, and Christopher Lamont. 2015. “Are Secular Parties the Answer?” In *Journal of Democracy* 26 (4): 125-139.

136 Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, p.10.

137 Interview with Egyptian activist. Washington, DC. May 2016.

138 Bellin, Eva. 2012. “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring.” In *Comparative Politics* 127-149.

139 Carothers, Thomas, and Richard Youngs. 2015. *The Complexities of Global Protests*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_257_Youngs-Carothers-Global_Protests_final.pdf.

140 Bayat, Asef. 2013. “The Arab Spring and its Surprises.” In *Development and Change* 44 (3): 587-601.

141 Asseburg, Muriel, and Heiko Wimmen. 2016. “Dynamics of Transformation, Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World.” In *Mediterranean Politics* 21 (1): 1-22.

The siren call of civil society

While each of the preceding explanations offers some explanatory power for non-Islamist youth abstention from formal politics, these explanations suggest a level of apathy that is misleading. Many of the non-Islamist revolutionaries have, in fact, remained politically engaged, but through informal politics (e.g. civil society and protest activity) rather than through organized politics. Civil society represents a more attractive and effective method than formal politics for non-Islamist youth to achieve their goals for several reasons: political parties are perceived as weaker and less effective than informal politics, civil society is an easier avenue to enter than politics, and civil society provides better incentives for young people than formal politics. For young people who want to be politically engaged, civil society provides a creative outlet and the freedom to engage in a variety of initiatives. Furthermore, as one Tunisian official told me, it is “*en vogue* to participate in civil society.”¹⁴²

While more than 110 parties sprung up after the revolution, only about two dozen have succeeded in achieving any sort of power in either the 2011 or 2014 elections. As some have argued, “secular parties have most often failed—and still fail—to present a viable liberal alternative to either old regimes or Islamist political forces.”¹⁴³ As Stephen Grand notes, “There is a tremendous hunger in the region, particularly among youth, for greater freedom, dignity, and opportunity, but there are few political parties or movements effectively representing that constituency.”¹⁴⁴ While a few non-Islamist-youth-focused parties sprung up after the revolution, lacking resources, they were quickly sidelined by parties that had roots in the Ben Ali era—Ennahda; CPR (Congress for the Republic), the center-left party that had been operating in exile from France after Ben Ali banned it in 2002,

and Ettakatol, the social democratic party founded in 1994. The non-Islamist parties also suffer from a lack of ideological coherence. With the exception of the Popular Front, a leftist coalition of socialist, Marxist, and other groups, the non-Islamist parties have failed to develop a clear, persuasive ideology capable of attracting the liberal revolutionaries. Rather, they primarily campaign as anti-Islamist or pro-secularist.

Nidaa Tounes, currently the most successful non-Islamist political party in Tunisia, not only has no clear ideology outside of anti-Islamist, but also has clear ties to the pre-revolutionary regime. The party of Beji Caid Essebsi, Tunisia’s 90-year-old president who served as Interior Minister, Defense Minister, and Foreign Affairs Minister under President Bourguiba, and as President of the Chamber of Deputies under Ben Ali, does not resonate with youth, despite rhetorically supporting youth participation in government. Furthermore, Nidaa lacks a coherent political ideology. Rather, it is a loose coalition of disparate interests and individuals that was already straining at the seams less than a year after its successful election in 2014.¹⁴⁵

While most Tunisian political parties make at least a basic attempt to recruit youth, as previously mentioned, the Islamist party Ennahda has the most sophisticated program and is most actively engaged in bringing youth into the party and into elected office. As the leader of a parliamentary watchdog NGO told me, only Ennahda and the Popular Front (a coalition of several leftist parties) have official programs to bring youth into the party, although they are not succeeding in attracting large numbers of young people.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, one young Tunisian said that even though all political parties have youth sections, the parties “are pushing youth away” with their policies.¹⁴⁷

142 Interview with Tunisian government official. Tunis. June 2016.

143 Boduszynski, Fabbe, and Lamont. “Are Secular Parties the Answer?”

144 Grand, *Understanding Tahrir Square*.

145 Lynch, Marc. “How the Media Trashed the Transitions.” In *Journal of Democracy*, 90-99.

146 Interview with Tunisian civil society activist. Tunis. June 2016.

147 Interview with Tunisian youth. Tunis. June 2016.

Additionally, political actors are not seen as professional or serious. As a Tunisian journalist told me, now that many members of the old regime have returned to power, bureaucrats believe they can get away with their previous unprofessional behavior such as not coming to work or engaging in corruption.¹⁴⁸ This has discouraged non-Islamist youth from participating in this arena.

While political parties are seen as ineffective, activists are confident in the ability of civil society to enact change. The leader of a youth-focused NGO told me that non-Islamist youth feel “their voice will be heard” in civil society and they can “make a change,” as opposed to formal politics where they feel “betrayed”. She said that young people do not feel “heard” within parties and many who originally joined parties in 2011 have since left public affairs altogether or joined CSOs.¹⁴⁹ One Tunisian told me that civil society is seen as “more efficient at changing the government’s politics than parliament,” citing civil society’s ability to protest, and enact campaigns that have been successful in changing government behavior so far.¹⁵⁰

Some of this confidence is well-placed. Bellin points out that Tunisian NGOs “have created a remarkably muscular network that not only monitors and blogs about but increasingly influences the political course of the country.”¹⁵¹ A study by the British Council and the American University in Cairo found “the expansion of civil society in Tunisia has been seen as a key achievement of the revolution.”¹⁵² The study cites a quantitative increase in CSOs that deal with civic engagement and notes that youth-led and youth-focused organizations are growing in both number and influence. However, those on the inside of government see formal politics as the most effective way to make a difference.

One young parliamentarian I interviewed said she entered politics because she wanted to “make change from the inside” and she believes parliament is a more effective change-maker than civil society.¹⁵³

The ability of civil society to influence government is helped, in theory, by a legal provision that requires government ministries to consult with civil society. However, several people with whom I met said these consultations are more of a box-checking exercise than a serious endeavor. Many CSOs do not have the capacity to contribute meaningfully to a discussion with government and the government is under no obligation to implement any of civil society’s suggestions.¹⁵⁴ Another civil society activist said that government sees civil society as a “nuisance,” rather than a partner and thus does not take the consultation role seriously.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, several people with whom I spoke argued that civil society lacks the capacity to drive real change. One person told me that international donors, like himself, are driving the civil society agenda, which lacks local buy-in.¹⁵⁶

Regardless of its real or perceived ability to make change, civil society is undoubtedly an easier entrée than politics. With no youth-specific parties, young non-Islamist activists have been forced to find their way into parties run by the older generation, many of whom are not welcoming of youth voices. Many of the non-Islamist political parties established in the wake of the revolution “mirrored the authoritarian environment that they had operated in for decades, thus blocking the rise of newly entering reform forces.”¹⁵⁷ Youth were not guaranteed leadership roles within parties and often had to fight those with significantly more

148 Interview with Tunisian journalist. Tunis. June 2016.

149 Interview with Tunisian civil society activist. Tunis. June 2016.

150 Interview with Tunisian youth. Tunis. June 2016.

151 Bellin, Eva. 2013. *Drivers of Democracy: Lessons from Tunisia*. Waltham, MA: Crown Center for Middle East Studies.

152 British Council and The American University in Cairo. 2013. *The revolutionary promise: youth perceptions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia*. Cairo: British Council.

153 Interview with Tunisian parliamentarian. Tunis. June 2016.

154 Interview with Tunisian political analyst. Tunis. June 2016.

155 Interview with Tunisian civil society activist. Tunis. June 2016.

156 Interview with international donor. Washington, DC. April 2016.

157 Asseburg, Muriel, and Heiko Wimmen. 2016. “Dynamics of Transformation, Elite Change and New Social Mobilization in the Arab World.” In *Mediterranean Politics* 21 (1): 1-22.

political experience for positions of power within parties. Civil society organizations and informal networks, on the other hand, were far more plentiful than parties and offered far greater leadership opportunities than parties. The 2011 Associations Law, formed after the revolution to open up the civil society field, saw the creation of around 4,000 CSOs.¹⁵⁸ While some of these organizations have since closed their doors, since the revolution, non-Islamist youth can far more easily start a new CSO than a political party and can more easily secure leadership positions within civil society.

Civil society also provides better incentives for non-Islamist youth than politics. Running a CSO can provide status and financial security and is seen as more rewarding than joining a political party.¹⁵⁹ Following the revolution, the international community poured funding into NGOs, sometimes at the expense of political parties and institutions. For example, through bilateral support, the U.S. government has given \$9.9 million for civil society since 2011, compared to just \$3.6 million for political competition and consensus building.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, Tunisian civil society has benefitted from some of the \$433 million spent across the Near East (NEA) region through regional and centrally-managed accounts (including the Middle East Partnership Initiative, USAID Middle East Regional programming, and the Near East Regional Democracy fund), compared to \$129 million spent on political competition and consensus building through the same funding streams.¹⁶¹

And between 2011 and 2013, the European Union spent 10 times more on civil society assistance than political competition.¹⁶² The international

community has spent some of its assistance on the formal political sphere. The United States and European governments and international NGOs have funded parliamentary training and government administration programs, in addition to elections programs (campaign training, elections observation missions), but the focus of international donors has been on civil society. While starting a CSO or a blog or otherwise being actively engaged in informal politics are generally well-respected in Tunisian society and are seen as the realm of youth, politics is seen as “an elite endeavor.”¹⁶³ One parliamentarian even remarked that parliament is “not respected as a job” for young and old alike.¹⁶⁴

Finally, civil society is a better avenue for the activists who are driven by economic concerns rather than politics. While Tunisia clearly experienced tremendous political change following the revolution, only 14 percent of Tunisians said they participated in the revolution because of a lack of political freedom.¹⁶⁵ Economic injustice is what drove the literal spark of the revolution—Mohamad Bouazizi’s self-immolation. What motivated people to join the revolution was “the discordance between the claims made by regimes as part of the process of seeking to legitimize themselves and the reality of regime repression and contempt.”¹⁶⁶ While certainly the formal political sector has a key role to play in addressing repression, corruption, and economic injustice, the two CSOs most frequently cited as “successful” during my interviews, iWatch and al Bawsala, specifically target these issues. The primary focus of iWatch is corruption and while Bawsala has been instrumental in advocating for the deepening of Tunisia’s democracy, much of their work is related to transparency—both by connecting citizens with their

158 Feuer, Sarah. 2015. *Beyond Islamists & Autocrats: Post-Jasmine Tunisia*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

159 Interview with Tunisian civil society activist. Tunis. June 2016.

160 This number includes U.S.-Tunisia bilateral support only, including the FY17 budget request figure of \$5 million for civil society and \$1.5 million for political competition and consensus building. U.S. State Department.

161 Country-level data for regional and centrally-managed accounts was not publicly available at the time of this writing. U.S. State Department.

162 The EU spent over 15 million Euros on civil society compared to about 1.58 million Euro on election

preparedness and internal political dialogue. European Commission. “European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations—Tunisia.” http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/tunisia/index_en.htm.

163 Interview with Tunisian youth. Tunis. June 2016.

164 Interview with Tunisian parliamentarian. Tunis. June 2016.

165 Arab Barometer Wave III dataset.

166 Joffe, George. 2011. “The Arab Spring in North Africa: Origins and Prospects.” In *The Journal of North African Studies* 16 (4): 507-532.

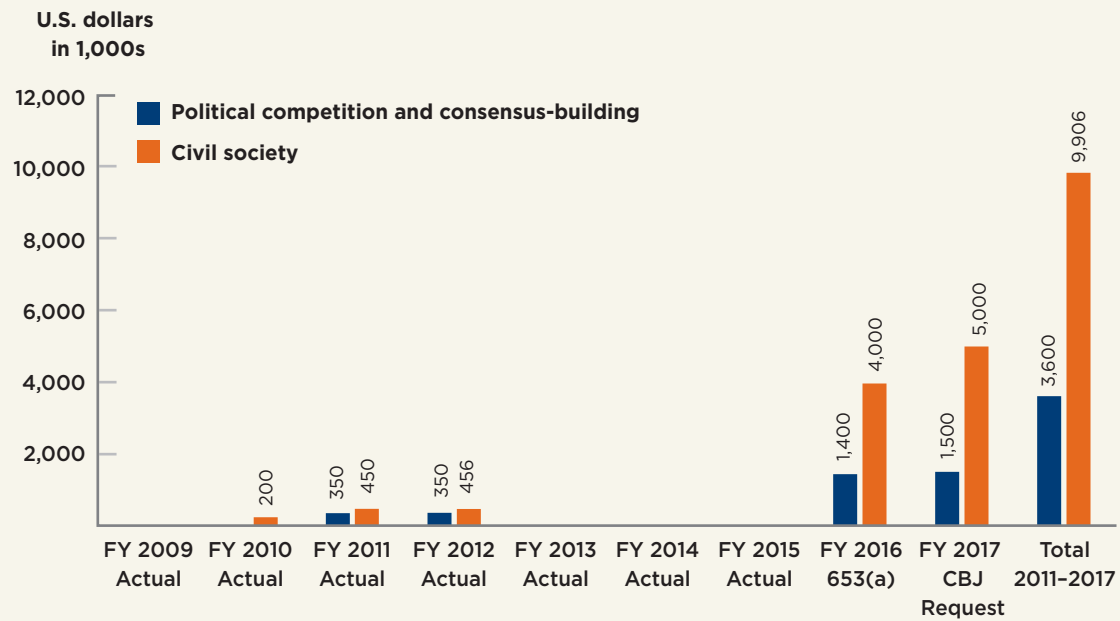
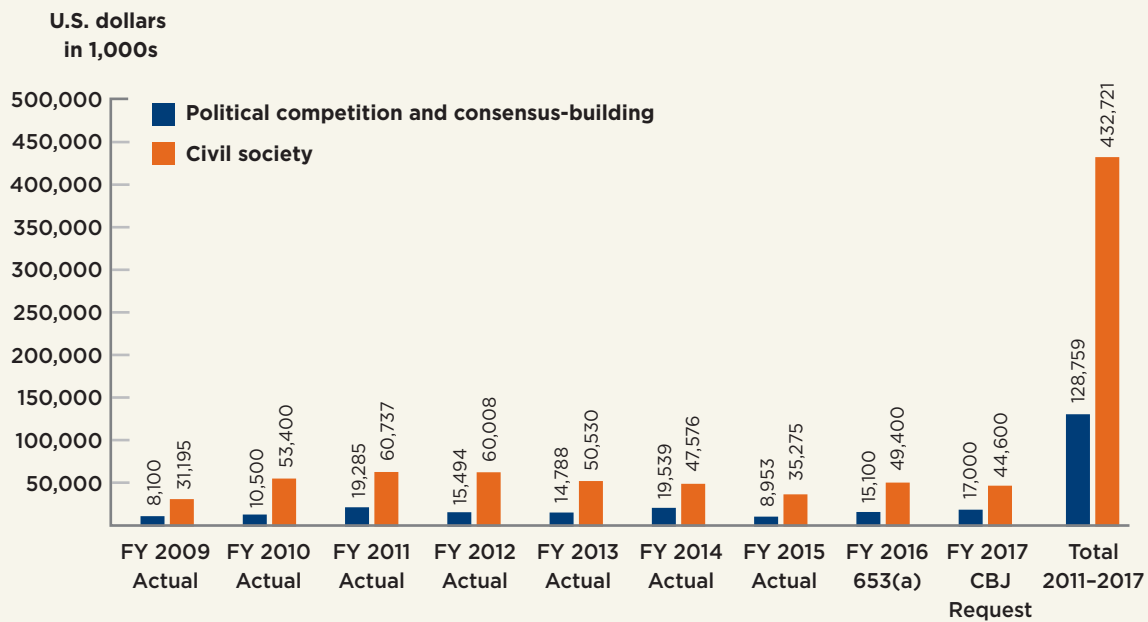
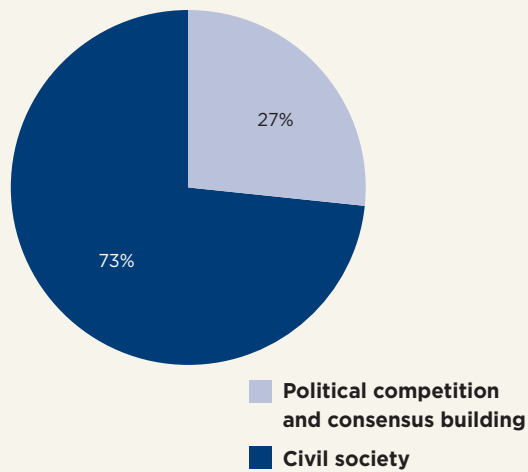
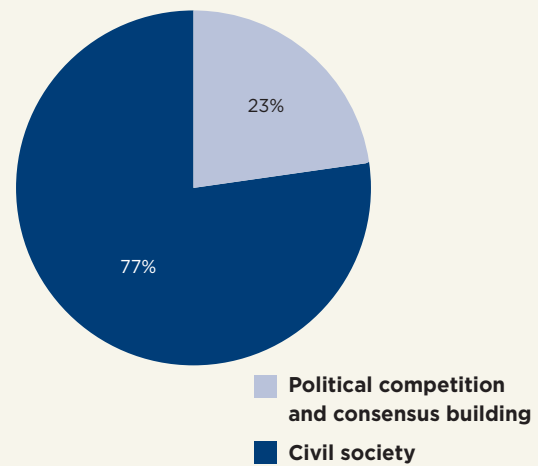
FIGURE 10. U.S. bilateral funding for Tunisia**FIGURE 11. U.S. regionally and centrally-managed funding for civil society and political competition (NEA regional total)**

FIGURE 12. U.S. bilateral funding for Tunisia



Source: U.S. State Department

FIGURE 13. U.S. regionally and centrally-managed funding for civil society and political competition (NEA regional total)



Source: U.S. State Department.

government and by monitoring and reporting on legislative and executive proceedings. Thus, many of the young non-Islamist Tunisians who were driven to the streets out of a desire to close the gap between the government and the governed have found a more welcoming home in Tunisian civil society than formal politics.

Too much civil society, too little politics: A danger to democracy

As this paper has shown, non-Islamist Tunisian youth (particularly the revolutionaries) are increasingly abstaining from formal politics and instead choosing to channel their political energy into civil society. While a strong and robust civil society is crucial to a successful democratic transition, civil society must be accompanied by a representative and effective political system. In 2004 Vickie Langohr noted a trend in the Arab world: the rise of civil society as the primary opposition to authoritarian states and the concurrent marginalization of opposition parties—a phenomenon she referred to as “too much civil society, too little politics.”¹⁶⁷ While her article focused on the political conditions under authoritarianism, not democracy, much of what Langohr described is playing out in Tunisia today with the potential for dangerous consequences. The crux of Langohr’s argument is that advocacy organizations are “ill-equipped” to serve as a counter-balance to the state (and to bring about regime change) for two reasons: their narrow focus prevents them from mobilizing large populations, and their reliance on foreign funding creates “strong support abroad but shallow roots at home.”¹⁶⁸ This phenomenon is unique neither to the Middle East nor to authoritarian regimes. Thomas Carothers observed this same phenomenon in democratizing countries around the globe. He found that civil society in transitioning countries was frequently “dominated by elite-run groups that have only tenuous ties to the citizens on whose behalf they claim to act, and they depend on international funders for budgets they cannot nourish from domestic sources.”¹⁶⁹ Carothers further argued that while “an active, di-

verse civil society often does play a valuable role in helping advance democracy . . . other evidence suggests that a strong civil society can actually reflect dangerous political weakness.”¹⁷⁰ Shari Berman took this argument to the extreme, writing about the role of a strong civil society and a weak state in aiding the rise of Nazism in Germany. She argued, “Absent strong and responsive political institutions, an increasingly active civil society may serve to undermine, rather than strengthen, a political regime.”¹⁷¹

While Tunisia is not likely to adopt fascism any time soon, the disengagement of Tunisia’s largest population group (i.e. youth) from formal politics is likely to negatively impact Tunisia’s democratic transition in real and tangible ways. The phenomenon I have observed in Tunisia—active disengagement by non-Islamist youth from formal politics and a focus on informal politics—has implications both for the ability of civil society to fulfill its role as guardian of the democratic transition and for the stability of Tunisia’s political system.

Civil society is unable to fulfill its role as guardian of the transition

First, the benefits of civil society for democratic consolidation come about when civil society is fulfilling all its roles—monitoring government, acting as a school for democracy, serving as an interest aggregator, increasing civic engagement and mediating between the government and the people. Civil society in Tunisia has been very effective at the watchdog role. One of the most successful civil society organizations, regularly lauded by Tun-

¹⁶⁷ Langohr, Vickie. 2004. “Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics: Egypt and Liberalizing Arab Regimes.” In *Comparative Politics* 181-204.

¹⁶⁸ Langohr, “Too Much Civil Society.”

¹⁶⁹ Carothers, Thomas. 1999-2000. “Civil Society: Think Again.” *Foreign Policy* 18-29.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Berman, Sheri. 1997. “Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic.” *World Politics* 401-429.

sians and international donors, is iWatch. Founded by two young Tunisians following the revolution as a branch of the international NGO Transparency International, iWatch works to address financial and administrative corruption both by documenting instances themselves and by providing Tunisians with the tools to document and fight against corruption that they witness. During the 2016 Ramadan holiday, iWatch set up a campaign to monitor whether government officials were coming to work, and reported its findings to the public. Tunisians with whom I spoke during this campaign were generally pleased with iWatch's work. While some Tunisian citizens (particularly government employees) were annoyed with iWatch's work and what they saw as frivolous monitoring, others were happy that iWatch was paying attention to how government bureaucrats—paid by Tunisian tax payers—were abusing their power.¹⁷²

While civil society has done a stellar job monitoring government behavior, translating that activity into government action is a far more complicated process. Take, for example, the fight over the Economic Reconciliation Law. The law, whose purpose is to provide closure to the financial crimes committed under the Ben Ali regime, was first introduced by President Essebsi in July 2015, arguing that it would allow the country to move forward and would bring much needed cash back into the government's coffers. However, it was quickly and roundly criticized by civil society groups (including very vocally by iWatch). More than 20 civil society groups came together under the campaign "Manish Msameh," (which means "I will not forgive"), carrying out a large social media campaign, lobbying officials, drafting letters, and organizing protests in downtown Tunis calling for the bill's repeal.

The bill was criticized because it allowed public officials, business executives and other private citizens who engaged in corruption under Ben Ali to evade prosecution by returning an agreed-upon

sum of the money that they stole from the government and people. The law could even free some former officials imprisoned for corruption offenses. Most troubling to some civil society activists was the provision that those who returned their stolen funds could do so anonymously, preventing any sort of public reckoning. To some in the Manish Msameh campaign, the bill also meant failing to provide for both the necessary transitional justice and institutional reforms to truly move Tunisia forward.¹⁷³

In responding to the bill, civil society demonstrated an impressive ability to build a network around a single issue, to generate public support, and to work with the government to carry out effective protest mechanisms. When a planned protest was denied by the Interior Ministry in September 2015 as being "against the state of emergency," the leader of the leftist political alliance the Popular Front intervened with Essebsi and the Interior Minister to allow the protest to happen.¹⁷⁴ Civil society groups also enlisted the support of the international NGO community, including Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, and the International Center for Transitional Justice, publicly criticizing the bill. But while civil society was ultimately successful in removing the piece of legislation from parliament's docket, the bill resurfaced in June 2016 and appears likely to pass.¹⁷⁵

While it is clear that civil society has played a crucial advocacy role during the saga of the economic reconciliation law, its efforts ultimately failed. This is due, in large part, to the fact that civil society does not have a partner in government and is not eager to find one. As Carothers argued, "Civil society and the state need each other and, in the best of worlds, they develop in tandem, not at each other's

172 Interviews with Tunisian civil society actors and journalists. Tunis. June 2016.

173 Ghribi, Asma. "Missing the Old Days." *Foreign Policy*. August 10, 2016. www.foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/10/missing-the-old-days/.

174 Sheils, Conor. "Tunisia Anti-Reconciliation Law Protest is Given Go-Ahead." *Tunisia Live*. September 12, 2015. <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2015/09/12/tunisia-anti-reconciliation-law-protest-is-given-go-ahead/>.

175 At the time of writing, the bill was under consideration by the newly appointed Chahed government.

expense.”¹⁷⁶ That has not been the case in Tunisia. Tunisia “suffers from the legacy of a past hostile to civil society” wherein civil society distrusts the government and the government distrusts civil society.¹⁷⁷ Activists worry they will be co-opted by the government, a tactic regularly used by the Ben Ali regime, and the lack of a tradition of civil society-state dialogue has prevented both sides from taking this role seriously. Furthermore, the allure of civil society has hurt political participation, as many Tunisians see the two sides—civil society and politics—as at odds with each other. One Tunisia expert told me that members of CSOs think they have to remain nonpartisan and therefore cannot even join a political party.¹⁷⁸ The need for cooperation between civil society and politics was conveyed by Foley and Edwards who ask, “if, as some hold, civil society’s chief virtue is its ability to act as an organized counterweight to the state, to what extent can this happen without the help of political parties and expressly political movements?”¹⁷⁹

Perhaps the most well-known example of civil society-government cooperation is the work of the National Dialogue Quartet—the group that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. The Quartet, formed in 2013 to keep the democratic transition on track after two assassinations and growing unease with the Nadha-led government, was made up of the heads of four powerful organizations—the Tunisian General Trade Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH), and the Order of Lawyers. The Quartet was successful in shepherding a negotiated settlement between most of Tunisia’s main political parties and drafting a roadmap to reignite the stalled political process. The National Dialogue process demonstrates the ability of civil

society to have a direct and influential role on politics and policy. However, the organizations that made up the Quartet were not necessarily representative of broader Tunisian civil society. The UGTT, for example, had played a powerful role even under Ben Ali, with the ability to grind the country to a halt with well-orchestrated strikes. Many within Tunisia’s more traditional civil society groups see the UGTT, in particular, as an arm of the state, rather than an independent body.

Another example of civil society-state cooperation is the constitution-drafting process. Early on, the National Constituent Assembly appointed one of its members, Badreddine Abdelkefi, to serve as an official liaison with civil society. Abdelkefi and his team organized a series of direct sessions, bringing together NCA members and CSOs, and held public meetings within each governorate to educate Tunisians about the constitution-drafting process and solicit input. The NCA also considered constitution drafts put out by civil society groups and held the “National Dialogue Around the Constitution” from December 2012 to February 2013 to allow the Tunisian public to comment on the draft constitution. While this process allowed civil society to have a voice in the extremely important constitution drafting process, the civil society-government engagement around the constitution was largely government-led. While several external organizations existed and attempted to influence the process on their own terms—most prominently Doustourna (“our constitution”)—civil society was most successful because of government will and a formal process that gave civil society a path to articulate their suggestions for and grievances with the draft constitution.

While in some cases civil society has been able to effectively voice the concerns of the Tunisian people to the government, more often, as many Tunisians with whom I spoke lamented, the government views civil society as a nuisance. Thus, despite the requirement of ministries to consult with civil society, their views are largely ignored. While Tunisian government officials have said that they do value civil society and take their concerns seriously, civil society activists feel that the government is

176 Carothers, Thomas. 1999–2000. “Civil Society: Think Again.” *Foreign Policy* 18–29.

177 Foundation for the Future. 2013. “Study on Civil Society Organizations in Tunisia.” p.18.

178 Interview with Tunisia expert. Washington, DC. May 2016.

179 Foley, Michael W., and Bob Edwards. 1996. “The Paradox of Civil Society.” In *Journal of Democracy* 7 (3): 38–52.

only using them to score points with a public that is largely sympathetic to civil society.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, because of the growing public disillusionment with politics, civil society has been largely unable to increase civic engagement, instead operating as a replacement for the state, rather than a partner with the state. This is clear from the continued protest activity and simultaneous decrease in voting, party membership, and declining attitudes toward the government.

Threats to political stability

Decreasing youth political engagement also has the potential to threaten Tunisia's political stability. As Poland's Bronislaw Geremek said, "There is no greater threat to democracy than indifference and passivity on the part of citizens."¹⁸¹ The most poignant (and extreme) example of the potential for civil society to sow instability is Berman's work on Germany. In her examination of 19th and early 20th century Germany she found that strong and effective political institutions allow civil society to channel its activity in a helpful and beneficial way—effectively carrying out the interest aggregation and state-society mediator roles. However, a weak state combined with a strong civil society can have dire consequences:

If . . . political institutions and structures are weak and/or the existing political regime is perceived to be ineffectual and illegitimate, then civil society activity may become an alternative to politics, increasingly absorbing citizens' energies and satisfying their basic needs. In such situations, associationalism will probably undermine political stability, by deepening cleavages, furthering dissatisfaction, and providing rich soil for oppositional movements. Flourishing civil society activity in these circumstances

signals governmental and party failure and may bode ill for the regime's future.¹⁸²

Renowned political scientist Samuel Huntington also observed this phenomenon, arguing that "societies with highly active and mobilized publics and low levels of political institutionalization often degenerate into instability, disorder, and even violence."¹⁸³ To be clear, Tunisia is not Germany. German CSOs in Berman's study, for example, were organized "within rather than across group boundaries."¹⁸⁴ Tunisian civil society (and politics) have taken a different path, instead adopting a consensus-based model. But Tunisia's tradition of consensus, particularly within formal politics, might, down the road, cause more harm than good.

The post-revolution political system from nearly the beginning of its life has chosen a path of consensus governance. On the positive side, Tunisia's consensus model has allowed it to mend the deep societal cleavages that manifested most clearly in the Islamist/non-Islamist divide. Both Ennahda and the major non-Islamist parties have consistently chosen the democratic process over the interests of any one party, accomplishing an impressive feat. Nevertheless, consensus governance is based on a model of compromise that has turned many, particularly youth, away from politics. The democratic activists who seek to move Tunisia further towards a fully consolidated liberal democracy are not interested in a watered-down political system that is designed to placate the former regime figures, the business elites, the labor unions, the Islamists, and themselves. Rather, many of them see consensus as killing—not strengthening—Tunisia's democracy.

Tunisia's consensus-based political path bears some resemblance to the pacted transitions model, an elite-driven transition wherein moderates from both the regime and opposition agree to play by

180 Interview with Tunisian government officials and civil society actors. Tunis. June 2016.

181 Quoted in Diamond, Larry. 1999. *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 242.

182 Berman, Sheri. 1997. "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic." In *World Politics* 401-429.

183 Quoted in Berman, . "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic."

184 Ibid.

a mutually acceptable set of rules.¹⁸⁵ This form of transition can be successful (the paradigmatic case is the Spanish transition to democracy) because the most powerful political players—both the regime and the opposition—agree on both the need for a transition and the rules to get there.¹⁸⁶

The danger with a pact, however, is that it is, at its most basic, an undemocratic tool used to achieve democracy. Thus, while a pact can be very helpful in the initial stages of transition, particularly in overcoming elite fears regarding transition, in most cases the pact must eventually be abandoned for a more inclusive and representative arrangement to fully consolidate democracy. This is where Tunisia is potentially in trouble.

In Tunisia, the close and deep relationship between Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, and Essebsi, which has been instrumental in keeping Tunisia's transition on track, has also impeded public buy-in of Tunisian politics. The behind-the-scenes negotiations conducted by Ghannouchi and Essebsi, as well as the work of the National Dialogue Quartet, were undoubtedly successful in helping Tunisia weather the challenges of transitioning from an autocracy to a democracy. Nevertheless, this form of negotiation and compromise explicitly empowers the elite—leaving out the mass public who were responsible for bringing about the democratic transition in the first place.

Therefore, the Tunisian government has, intentionally or not, set up a situation that deepens the cleavages between government and civil society, rather than addresses them. This problem is exacerbated by the recently inaugurated National Unity Government, which specifically set out to bring all parties (including the powerful labor unions)

to the table to help pass much-needed reform legislation. What Tunisia's political leaders failed to account for, however, is that by creating an even larger dichotomy between government and civil society, they are setting the country up for continued civil conflict. Additionally, the weak ties between civil society and government, as described above, make it easy for the government to ignore civil society, as was eventually the case with the Economic Reconciliation Law. While the pacted transitions model helped Tunisia overcome the initial threats to its democratic progress, to continue on the path toward full consolidation, the government must move beyond the consensus-based model to one that is more inclusive of civil society and the mass public.

185 Karl and Schmitter define pacts as a transition where, "Elites agree up on a multilateral compromise among themselves." Karl, Terry Lynn and Philippe C. Schmitter. 1991. "Modes of Transition in Southern and Eastern Europe, Southern and Central America." In *International Social Science Journal* (May):269-84.

186 For a thorough examination of the Spanish case see Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

In studies of youth engagement around the world an interesting trend is emerging. As expected, youth in both consolidated and transitioning democracies are less likely than older generations to participate in formal politics. What is surprising, is that those same youth:

Are not just disengaged from the formal institutions of liberal democracy; they are also less likely to participate in nonconventional political activities, such as joining new social movements or participating in political protest . . . Thus we find that millennials across Western Europe and North America are less engaged than their elders, both in traditional forms of political participation and in oppositional civic activity.¹⁸⁷

Yet, as this paper has shown, this is not the case in Tunisia. Just like they defied all odds to bring about the revolution in 2010 and 2011, non-Islamist Tunisian youth are again bucking the trend: remaining politically active and civically engaged, but explicitly abstaining from formal politics and opting for the informal.

While non-Islamist Tunisian youth have opted out of formal politics for several reasons—disillusionment with the current political system and political leaders; perceptions of ageism and traditions of patriarchy; and inability to organize beyond the street—the strongest explanation is that non-Islamist youth are choosing civil society over politics. Tunisian youth make up 60 percent of the population. If they were able to overcome their polarization they would constitute a powerful political force. Yet civil society is a more attractive option to non-Islamist young people, particularly the revolutionaries, because it is easier, provides

better incentives, and is perceived as a more effective change agent than the formal political sphere, which has struggled to pass necessary reform legislation or improve the economic conditions impacting all, particularly young, Tunisians. While a strong and robust civil society is crucial to the consolidation of Tunisia's democracy, without a partner, civil society will be unable to fulfill all of its roles—acting as protector of the transition and mediating between the government and the people. Unless Tunisia's revolutionaries find partners within government, we are likely to see a growing and deepening divide between civil society and government that has the potential to destabilize the Tunisian transition.

Policy recommendations

Tackling the issues outlined in this paper will require encouraging political participation without simultaneously discouraging civil society engagement. Young non-Islamist Tunisians, particularly the revolutionaries, are smart, creative, passionate people who have accomplished incredible things and should continue to be supported by the international community. Nevertheless, donors have placed an outsized emphasis on supporting civil society and, as a consequence, have neglected the formal political sphere. The Tunisian government should work to attract the younger generation into formal politics and build bridges between government and civil society. The international community should recalibrate its assistance to provide much needed resources to all branches of government. In particular, funding for political party training and institutional design must continue despite the success of the first two elections and the “completion” of the first phase of the democratic transition. To address the downside to consensus-based governance, as described above, donors should help Tunisia move beyond the consensus model towards a more traditional govern-

¹⁸⁷ Foa, Roberto Stefan, and Yascha Mounk. 2016. “The Democratic Disconnect.” *Journal of Democracy* 27 (3): 5-17.

ment/loyal opposition model. Donors should also develop programs that encourage cross-pollination and train the government on how to best engage with civil society. And young non-Islamist Tunisians should participate in formal politics—either by voting for their elected representatives, running for office themselves, or by developing relationships and alliances with elected officials and civil servants.

Make government attractive

As a first step to bring young people into government, the Tunisian government should work to make government work more appealing. This is not an easy task. Resources are scarce within the bureaucracy and Tunisia's leaders suffer from very low approval ratings, particularly by youth. For example, almost a third of Tunisian youth rate politicians as unintelligent and two-thirds of Tunisian youth rate politicians as dishonest.¹⁸⁸ One way to change the public perception of government service is by investing heavily in resources—both physical and human—across all branches of government. The physical resource piece is a relatively easy fix, should donors choose to address it. For example, as of now, there is only one photocopier in Palais de Justice, which is often broken or lacking ink or paper.¹⁸⁹ Parliamentarians do not have individual offices within the parliament building and share staff between them. Donors could provide new or updated electronic equipment or technology or help refurbish physical office space to make working in a government office more attractive and comfortable.

The Tunisian bureaucracy is already bloated, ineffective, and inefficient. A report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace noted that “the country's bureaucracy could operate more efficiently and effectively with a significantly reduced workforce.”¹⁹⁰ Thus, it is not an issue of bringing

more bodies into government, but rather changing the public perception of government service to attract dynamic individuals committed to democratic change and to effective governance at key levels within the civil service and the political class. One place to start is through the “Tunisia Digital 2020” plan, passed by the government, which aims to digitize the bureaucracy by creating a completely paperless administration (in addition to providing internet access to all Tunisian households) by 2020.

Build trust between government and civil society

The previous recommendation is admittedly superficial, but could serve as a first step in changing the perception of government. In order to address the government-civil society divide on a more long-term scale the government should work to build trust with civil society. As one Tunisian official told me, “there is a wall between the youth and the state—we need to break down that wall and build trust.”¹⁹¹ Part of building trust is elevating youth to higher and more influential and visible positions within the government. During meetings with both the ONJ and the Ministry of Youth, I was struck by how few young people I encountered. For a young Tunisian to visit the Ministry of Youth and not interact with any other young people sends a loud signal that the government does not take youth and their role in Tunisian society and politics seriously. The Chahed government may bring some positive changes here. The new minister of youth and sports, for example, Majdouline Cherni, is a 35-year-old architect who previously served as the state secretary (roughly equivalent to a deputy secretary) responsible for the “Martyrs and Wounded of the Revolution and Terrorist Attacks.” She replaces 49-year-old lawyer Maher Ben Dhia. Minister Cherni should ensure that her ministry is both representative of and represents her constituency: young Tunisians.

Additionally, to truly break down the wall between civil society and government, the government must

188 Arab Barometer Wave IV data.

189 Aliriza, Fadil. “A Verdict on Change.” *Foreign Policy*. August 10, 2016. foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/10/a-verdict-on-change/.

190 Muasher, Marwan, Marc Pierini, and Alexander Djerassi. 2016. *Between Peril and Promise: A New Framework for Partnership with Tunisia*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

191 Interview with Tunisian government official. Tunis. June 2016.

recognize the value of civil society. Unfortunately, the measures requiring government consultation with civil society are ineffective. By mandating consultation, no organic process of civil society-government interaction has developed. Government should recognize that civil society organizations are articulating the interests of the Tunisian people—their constituents—and there is value, therefore, in listening to their concerns. This involves creating a culture of external consultation that is largely absent. Furthermore, civil society must organically develop its role of interest aggregator and mediator to learn how to most effectively convey its views to government outside of the formal consultation process.

Civil society must also cut the government some slack. Not every consultation will lead to a direct change in policy. Rather, civil society must recognize that its concerns are simply one part of the policy process. However, for their concerns to be taken seriously at all, non-Islamist youth need to vote. Once the government is aware that young people do not vote, they will feel no obligation to carry out any youth-driven initiatives.

Build trust between government and people

Another way for the government to connect with the people is to explore the model of constituent services. The U.S. Congress, albeit not a great example of efficiency and with an approval rating of 18 percent (as of October 2016),¹⁹² is somewhat unique in its dual role as legislator and constituent service-provider. By serving as the designated link between individuals and the government, Congress plays a key role in American democracy and ties people to their government. American citizens may not like their individual member of Congress, but they at least have a dedicated place within their elected government to go to seek help—or at least to air their grievances. One needs only to walk the halls of one of the congressional office buildings to see this model in action. For the Tunisian parliament to undertake this role would require

a significant staffing increase. Thus, the municipal elections, expected to take place by the end of 2017,¹⁹³ might be the best chance to create a legally-mandated constituent service vehicle. This would provide a direct link between the people and their elected officials and solidify the role of elected officials as representatives of their constituents, rather than as cogs in a bureaucratic wheel.

Cross-pollinate

A direct way to tear down the wall between government and civil society is to develop a program that provides for cross-pollination between government and civil society. Donors could provide funding for civil society actors to spend a year working in a government office and for bureaucrats or elected officials to spend a year working in a CSO. Additionally, one international CSO actor suggested that government officials should be trained on how to engage with youth the same way donors train youth to engage with officials.¹⁹⁴ Donors could provide training programs on citizen engagement for government officials.

Address youth issues holistically

Many Tunisian officials address the youth “problem” through one of two lenses—security or unemployment. While the high youth unemployment rate is likely contributing to Tunisia’s outsized ISIS fighter contingency, focusing on employment programs or vocational training programs only addresses one of the myriad grievances of young non-Islamist Tunisians. Tunisian officials should move beyond the unemployment paradigm to address the lack of youth inclusion in a comprehensive way. One tangible way to nurture the government-youth relationship and to encourage youth participation in government is with a government-wide youth strategy. By developing a concrete program that both enumerates the primary issues facing youth and identifies strategies to address those issues, the government will signal to young Tunisians that it

192 Gallup. “Congress and the Public.” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx>.

193 The municipal elections have been repeatedly pushed back. At the time of this writing, they were expected to take place by the end of 2017.

194 Interview with international civil society actor. Tunis. June 2016.

takes their issues seriously. To do so will require an interagency mechanism that directly reports to the prime minister to bridge the divides between ministries that currently operate in silos. The most effective strategy will involve representatives of non-Islamist and Islamist youth in both the development and implementation stages of the strategy.

Additionally, officials should refrain from using the municipal elections as an excuse to delay addressing youth concerns. The Youth Ministry's focus on encouraging youth participation in the municipal elections (both in the voting booth and in running for office) is a good start. But the elections have been postponed enough times that Tunisians no longer take them seriously. Officials should instead work with youth-led civil society groups and social movements on how to best communicate their grievances and how to work together to ensure the success of Tunisia's democratic transition. Donors should also refrain from putting too much stock into the municipal elections. Even if the elections do eventually take place, they are not likely to dramatically alter the political landscape in Tunisia on their own. Rather than wait until the end of 2017 to encourage youth participation in politics, donors should begin to work with youth now on the importance of developing alliances with government and on building political platforms, encouraging civic engagement, and articulating their needs in the most effective manner possible.

By examining post-revolutionary Tunisia, it is clear that the problem of "too much civil society, too little politics" is not unique to authoritarian states. Nor is it unique to Tunisia. Rather, the lessons from the Tunisian case can be applied to other transitioning states. As I have noted, the phenomenon of citizen disengagement from politics is a global phenomenon. More and more young and old across the globe are becoming frustrated with traditional formal political structures and are instead choosing to channel their advocacy through informal or independent entities. The most poignant lesson from Tunisia's transition is that political parties and other formal political structures should work to include all voices in the transition. Particularly in a transitioning democracy, govern-

ments must remain responsive to the needs of all of their constituents, particularly the youth, and the youth must cultivate allies within government in order for the transition to succeed.

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