



Mobilisation of Arab youth: an experience and a form of political participation

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Many names have been given to this movement: Arab Spring, Arab revolution, Arab uprising, etc. But whatever we call it, what Arab societies have experienced lately is not only a pivotal dynamic but also a crucial period for the region.

It is important to stress that the underlying problem is also economic and that, unfortunately, this dimension is absent from analysis of these developments because commentators – including the media – focus exclusively on the political factor. However, there is no denial of the corruption, the abuse of privilege and the misappropriation of resources by clans close to regime leaderships. Of course, similar phenomena are to be found in other countries and as long as they exist, these democratic movements will continue.



Photos by Marwa Tunki



THE FACTS

Over the last few years, as a doctoral student conducting research into new forms of youth political participation, but also as a trainer-consultant interested in the development of youth in this region, I have been considering the following questions: are young Arabs committed to the societies in which they live? Do they feel that they belong to a community and share common values? Can they identify with their society, have confidence in its institutions and participate in its development?

- ♥ Low unemployment rates obviously mean better future prospects. In this region, however, the difficulties in finding employment have fuelled concern and continue to do so.
- ♥ Young people suffer to varying degrees from a general crisis of confidence in institutions and the elites, which has led them to adopt fatalistic attitudes.
- ♥ Young people have less confidence in national institutions than in the media or even NGOs.
- ♥ Young people no longer believe in the future because they feel they have been abandoned by the authorities.
- ♥ A lack of confidence in institutions does not lead systematically to youth disaffection, and the desire to participate may be expressed in different ways. Participation in the non-profit sector is significant, as is political involvement.



"Youth, a priority"

What we are seeing here are not traditional forms of participation, but "unconventional" ones such as strikes, demonstrations, ethical financing, etc. Young people are showing a keen interest in civic participation, but in new ways.

The protagonists of these movements are mainly young people and women who aspire above all to a democratic and prosperous society and are united under the banner of justice, freedom and dignity.

What typifies them is the image of young people who have lost all confidence in political parties but show great attachment to social values, the family, etc.

Hence, if we are to be fair and take an optimistic view of the future, it is important to recognise that the voice of the young people, their organisations and the peoples of the Arab region has not been heard. The reactions of the major powers (especially America and Europe) initially revealed a certain discomfort, although the issues at stake differed from one country to another. In one way or another, the major powers supported these regimes for a long period, not only for security reasons but also out of "immigration concerns". But the will for change, the values of freedom and the fight against inequality eventually brought about a change in their way of co-operating with the region. And this is only the beginning.

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This uprising, this “Arab Spring” led by young people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan and other countries of the region, has had the following direct results:

- the emergence of new youth movements (Mohamed Bouazizi’s act of desperation and the unprecedented protest movement by Tunisian youth, 25 January in Egypt, 20 February in Morocco, 17 February in Libya, etc.);
- the beginnings of a democratic transition;
- constitutional reforms;
- the emergence of young parliamentarians in Morocco;
- a new era and new hopes;
- awareness of a different way of doing things with and for young people;
- recognition and sense of young people’s contribution to society;
- new hopes as to the usefulness of work done by young people, their involvement in society and their active citizenship.

The role of youth organisations is now starting to take new directions, not only to build and support democratic processes but also to guarantee the proper implementation of government policies and monitoring to ensure that the processes set in motion meet young people’s real aspirations. It is a major task and a European partnership is eagerly awaited not only to enhance youth organisations’ institutional capacities but also to share tools and methods for democratic management of youth organisations and in the field of good governance.

Nonetheless, it is important not to forget that it is high time that all partners of the youth sector were included. Indeed, many new youth organisations are active and present in the countries of the Arab world, but are absent from co-operation programmes, for subjective reasons or because of the security-based approaches of the past. There

is no doubt, however, that the mutual negative images are starting to change and that attitudes, too, are starting to shift, especially as regards the question of Islam.

Two important processes affecting the Euro-Arab region should be noted:

- On the one hand, the young people who use new technologies and new forms of political participation (including within youth organisations) which drove the Arab Spring are aware that their mobilisation has started to transform the societies of the Maghreb and the Arab region in general.
- On the other, economic recession has had a profound impact in Europe.

Both of these processes will no doubt have major repercussions for the development of the Euro-Arab region in the years ahead.

All these dynamics represent an opportunity for the Euro-Arab region in the youth field. A few one-off or annual activities are no longer enough and all indicators and the mutual needs of players in both regions (Europe and the Arab world) encourage the implementation of a co-operation strategy in the youth field with mechanisms to ensure its continuity. This is the strong signal awaited by youth work stakeholders in both regions. In a historic period such as this, means must be found to encourage opportunities for intercultural sharing and for co-operation on education for democratic citizenship, and a new governance model in the youth field.

It is equally important not to forget that this is an aspiration expressed repeatedly by youth organisations in both regions. The aim is to establish a framework for partnership and a sustainable mechanism which will support initiatives of young people in Europe, the Gulf states and the Arab countries towards sharing of practices and a better understanding of each other’s management and working methods, via shared experiences that create opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding.

The Arab Spring has ushered in a new era in the Euro-Arab region, a region at the heart of international developments. The recent changes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and the reforms in other countries such as Morocco and Jordan have opened up new prospects and created new opportunities. After years of autocratic rule which held back political and economic development, young people in the Arab world are looking hopefully to the future. People’s, and especially young people’s, expectations of change are typified by a desire for a democratic transition accompanied by economic and social development, peace, stability and prosperity in the region. Demand for this has been particularly strong on the part of Arab youth. In rising up against their regimes, young Arabs issued a call to the rest of the world for a more prosperous future based on job creation, economic growth, equality and democracy.

The challenge now facing the region’s partners is to meet those expectations and respond effectively to that call. Changes in the South will inevitably influence many aspects of economic, social and political relations in the Euro-Arab and Euro-Mediterranean regions. Young people must find their place in this process because, in this new context, the direct repercussions both for economic relations between the two regions and for bilateral and multilateral relations are obvious, and this provides us with a unique opportunity to strengthen Euro-Arab co-operation. We can now work to turn these political changes into an effective partnership. It is time to work for an increased regional dimension in the youth field, for a co-operation framework which will facilitate co-operation on youth policies, capacity building and non-formal education.

In this new context, Euro-Arab relations should be based on four pillars: youth, peace, democracy and economic development. It is important to draw the attention of pan-European and pan-Arab

organisations to the need for further elaboration of a Euro-Arab agenda based on these four pillars. Nobody can fail to be aware of the important role which young people and civil society can and must play and it is therefore essential to involve them more fully in this new co-operation.

The European institutions, the League of Arab States’ youth department and the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth have played a major role in these changes by creating opportunities for training, meetings and dialogue and promoting democratic objectives, peace and stability in the region. There is, however, a growing need to strengthen this type of partnership given the sheer size of the two regions (Europe with all the Council of Europe member states and the Arab region, including the Gulf states and the members of the Arab League far from the shores of the Mediterranean). There is also a need for new ideas and a need for an institutional framework with a sustainable mechanism, on the model of the North-South Centre, for long-term action as regards the promotion of dialogue between European and Arab countries and the sharing of experience and expertise. The Council of Europe’s historic response to European youth in the wake of the events of May 1968 was to set up the European Youth Foundation and the European Youth Centres; it is such a response that we dream of hearing and seeing.

Personally, in the face of all this, I have feelings of joy and relief. Thanks to young people and their mobilisation, things are starting to move. They have challenged and changed entrenched attitudes such as political inaction, non-participation, despair and abuse of privilege. I am optimistic, therefore, that the forces at work in the Arab world and in the Maghreb can make further advances and begin to breathe freedom.



Arab youth

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NEED FOR A COMMON PROJECT

Arab policy makers must believe in the need to build new images of youth. The Nordic countries offer an instructive example. In these countries young people are placed firmly at the heart of policy making and their engagement, creativity and critical spirit are regarded as a practical and socially useful resource. What is more, young people matter to us today for what they are today, and not just because they are necessary to the renewal of society, because they will be tomorrow's adults or because our pensions depend on their future employment.

There is a need for a common project, but it is as difficult to build as it is essential. Several delicate balances need to be struck:

- between a common national history and manifold individual experiences;
- between a long-term collective vision and the urgency of specific situations;
- between shared values and the diversity of stakeholders.

The aim being success for young people, the common project cannot be based on a policy of victimisation or categorisation. And in the face of changing values (related to society, employment and the family), the common project must be constantly renewed and rethought to give young people belief in themselves, in their personal future and in the future of society.

Young Arabs need to be listened to more and to be provided with mechanisms for integration and opportunities for participation in a dispassionate climate in which freedom, dialogue, diversity and civic responsibility, democracy in short, are the key principles that underpin young people's new relations with the state, society, the economy and the nation.

I have a feeling of confidence in the future, hope for a better tomorrow and equal opportunities for all. But between hope/optimism and reality there is a long road strewn with fears and uncertainties. Nevertheless, I remain happy that young people are determined to carry on the processes that have been set in motion. These are lengthy processes which will need to accumulate experience, bring in more and more people and, above all, set up education projects and programmes to support change and reform.

It would no doubt be easy to continue to define these possible responses and detail the necessary practical steps, but I also wanted to include the personal account of one of the many protagonists of these revolutions and processes of change. Here, then, is an excerpt from an interview with Karim Kasim, a young Egyptian.

Khalil: *Could you present yourself?*

Karim: I am Karim Kasim, an Egyptian, Arab, Muslim, Mediterranean, African and global citizen with multiple layers who cares about the poor and needy, who works in the development sector using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), who believes in free and easy access to information and knowledge to all underprivileged people. Youth are the heartbeat of the world, they make change and they drive developments. Human rights, democracy and intercultural dialogue are some of the most important values I believe in to which I dedicate part of my work and life. I see that the shift of power to the hands of the people has started already. Young men and women change the world from their own squares of Tahrir and others around the globe. And I hope that I am a small part of this youth movement that is changing the world.

Khalil: *What can you say about the role of youth work (youth NGOs, formal and informal youth groups, etc.) during the Arab Spring in your country?*

Karim: I do believe that youth played the main and key role in the Arab Spring. They were the ones who organised and most importantly believed in the cause and worked hard to make Egypt a better place. Maybe they did not expect to oust dictators but they believed that they could do it, even though it looked impossible. They didn't know that it would happen but they believed it might happen, and that was enough to make it happen.

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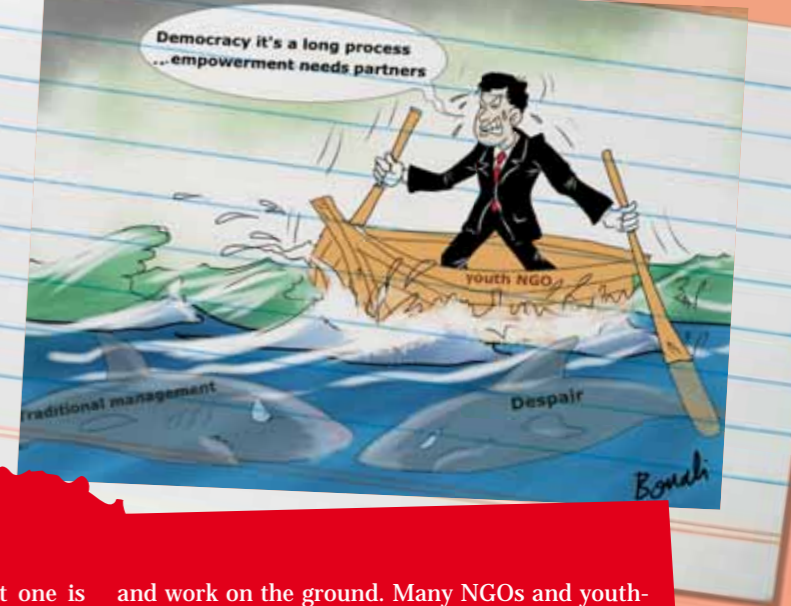
Two things are important here. The first one is youth work and its accumulation for at least two decades was behind building the courage and momentum for this Arab Spring. It was not a stand-alone revolution but it was an accumulation of work and confidence. Also, working with many different actors in our Arab nations as well as internationally was key to learning and practicing human rights and advocating for them, which was key in the Arab Spring itself.

The Arab Spring and its success were more the results of the work of informal youth groups and initiatives rather than formal ones due to security reasons. Indeed, the dictator states were behind any NGO and youth organisations, making it hard for them to just do "traditional work". The absence of the rule of law was also key to hindering formal youth organisations. But young people always find ways to come together and social media and the Internet were the medium for that.

Khalil: *After the democratic youth movements, is there any consequence on Arab youth work in your context?*

Karim: Yes indeed. The main consequences and challenges are the lack of new transparent laws and regulations that govern and organise our work, in Egypt but also in many other Arab nations.

On the one hand, the democratic transition has not been smooth or productive yet and we fear the "reverse revolution" or the "failure of the revolution" and a crackdown on youth and youth organisations. On the other hand, the transition provided more spaces for more informal actions



and work on the ground. Many NGOs and youth-led work took to the streets and rural areas to do things on their own, which is great.

Khalil: *How do you see the future of the youth work in your context?*

Karim: I see pros and cons, of course. On the one hand, the positive side is that young people have gained a lot of confidence and belief in their own capabilities and that they can make changes. On the other hand, I am worried about the future because I do not see much of an enabling environment for youth to take part in real formal institutions such as the parliament and government among others. The elders still work in traditional ways, which do not give formal space to young people.

Khalil: *Do we need Euro-Arab youth co-operation?*

Karim: Of course we do! We live around one big lake that is the Mediterranean, which connects people and especially young people. Whether we like it or not, our youths are connected and – for instance, those from the south risk their lives in the sea to reach the other side thinking that it is heaven. Despite this sad and dangerous experience of riding the sea for a better future, I think young people should keep sustainable relations to make sure that equal opportunities are available to youth groups on both the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean.

These should be opportunities for knowledge and capacity to make their own futures and not to wait for somebody else to tell them what to do, or how to do it.