Listen to the Youth: The Importance of Increasing Youth Political Participation in the MENA Region

Policy Issue
Young people played a pivotal role in the 2011 uprisings. Since then, governments around the region have marginalized their voices and left their hopes unfulfilled. Youth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) face increased state repression, restricted freedoms, and worsening economic conditions. Political factors restrict social and economic progress in the region.

The Context
The Governance and Local Development Institute held a youth engagement roundtable in Arabic on October 31 2022 with prominent activists, researchers, and civil society leaders, examining the attitudes and aspirants of MENA youth. Participants discussed ways to promote youth political participation, focusing specifically on local politics in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Iraq. Participants included **Rafiah Al Talei**, editor-in-chief for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's *Sada*; **Shivan Fazil**, a researcher from SIPRI's Middle East and North Africa Program; **Asma Khalifa**, a Libyan activist and researcher who has worked on human rights, women's rights, and youth empowerment, and; **Dina Shehata**, a senior researcher and head of the Egyptian Studies Unit at the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS) in Cairo. **Marwa Shalaby**, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, moderated the event.

MENA's Youth Population
MENA's youth population is booming: 60 percent of the population is under the age of 30. 28 percent are between 15 and 29 years of age, totaling more than 108 million people. This is the largest youth population in the region's history, yet, their economic prospects are grim, and governments impede their civil and political freedoms.

A recent survey conducted by *Sada* indicates that youth prioritize civil and political freedoms, seek improvements in the economic conditions of their countries, and want to reduce unemployment. The employment situation is especially dire: Only one-third of young people in the region have a regular income, while all others are temporarily or permanently without work. Youth also want to enhance peace and stability, bolster women's rights, and support arts and culture.

Photo Credit: Unsplash

Demanding Democracy
Findings from a recent FES Youth Survey in 12 MENA countries present a strange contradiction: Youth continue to demand democracy, but the majority are no longer interested in politics. These trends are particularly evident in Syria, Tunisia, and Jordan.

Youth have not lost hope. Rather, they have turned their attention to economic and livelihood concerns. In Egypt, as Shehata mentioned, they also rely on different types of engagement: Young people have turned to social media to use sarcasm and comedy as a political tool but are less likely to take to the streets in the way they did in 2011.

Similar dynamics are found elsewhere. In Iraq, Fazil explained, research conducted by SIPRI finds very low levels of interest in formal politics, particularly among the youth. Furthermore, corruption of the political process by the elite and loss of trust in politics were seen as the main

obstacles to Iraqi political participation. In Libya, as Khalifa noted, the recent conflict has contributed to a generational divide. Younger populations are much more likely to disengage from politics, worried about the uncertain and insecure political environment that involves decreased safety, more assassination of political leaders, and increased constraints on civil society. Young people display much less confidence in formal institutions today.

Youth continue to demand equitable distribution of resources and less corruption, but the shrinking civic space and enhanced state repression make formal political participation increasingly difficult.

Political constraints

The politics in the region fundamentally constrain youth engagement. According to Shehata, two very different political challenges face MENA countries. One set of countries faces ethno-religious and regional divisions, including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen. These divisions are the main obstacles to youth political participation, and the diffusion of power emboldens the leaders of ethno-religious and regional groups. These countries have high levels of corruption among regional leaders and substantial foreign interference in local affairs due to a breakdown in central state power. Many of these countries have become the sites of proxy wars in the region.

The second set of countries faces deepening authoritarianism, including Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf countries. These countries are experiencing an overconcentration of power in the central government, with resources controlled by a very small group of state elites. Control of oil and other resources can strengthen the government's control over its population.

In both sets of countries, the youth confront a failing education system that does not prepare them for the labor market and few economic and employment opportunities to maintain their livelihoods. Additionally, political engagement is limited as they confront failing and corrupt governments that crush dissent and restrict public expression.

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FIGURE O.9

Necessity to Create Jobs for Women and Men, 1950–2100
population in millions
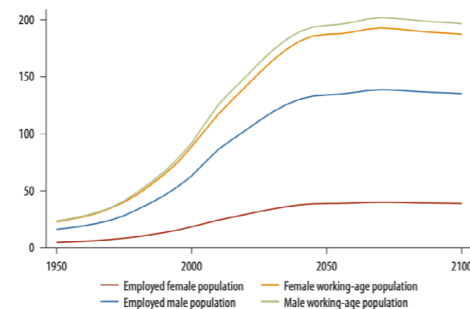
Sources: UN DESA 2010; WDI 2011 (World Bank multiple years).

Source: "World Bank. 2013. Opening Doors : Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa. MENA Development Report;. Washington, DC. World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/12552 License: CC BY 3.0 IGO."

Gender disparities

A recent World Bank Report finds that if the entire working-age population were to seek employment, the region would have to create more than 200 million new jobs by 2050. More than 75 percent of these jobs would go to women.

Women face not only the brunt of these deteriorating political and economic conditions but also the harshest forms of social exclusion. Entrenched patriarchal values and opposition to diversity and tolerance prevent them from reaching their potential. This is evident in the various restrictions imposed by norms or laws that aim to obstruct women from achieving their goals in social, political, and economic spheres.

COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges, as violence against women increased during the pandemic. This evidence points to deep gender inequalities in regional societies and a generational clash between the youth advocating for openness and tolerance and a political vanguard enforcing conservative norms and values on its people.

Full Policy Roubtable in Arabic, Recorded via Zoom and published via YouTube, watch here.

About GLD

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) is a research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The institute is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.

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