

The Tunisian Revolution and Its Youth: The Democratic Deficit

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Brief Analysis

November 27, 2017

Tunisia is rightfully proud of what it has accomplished, for it was Tunisia that triggered the most important wave of far-reaching political transformation in the Arab world since the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Despite the movement's trajectory in the region and its evolution into bloody struggles that have destroyed countries and displaced inhabitants, it marked a definite turning-point. While the youth of Tunisia are right to take pride in being the first of this movement to offer their innocent blood for the slogans of work, freedom, dignity, and patriotism, this pride does not excuse us from asking hard questions.

But where are the youth of Tunisia seven years after the revolution?

Close followers of the Tunisian scene have noted that Tunisian youth are not playing the roles expected of them in public affairs, as evidenced by their complete absence from leading party positions, their sparse participation in voting since the revolution, and the absence of a national youth policy that would institutionalize their participation in public life and decision-making.

This does not mean that Tunisian youth—especially those in urban, progressive, reformist, and tolerant milieus—are not interested in democracy. Rather, the issue is that the means of expressing this concern are inadequate, indicating a democratic deficit that poses a threat to the future of Tunisia.

The democratic deficit is evident through the return of Tunisian youth to a virtual space where they follow their dreams of democracy in constructing the "Second Republic," a republic of public freedom and the rule of law. These dreams are based not on solid ground but on social media, with the youth aiming their arrows of criticism at public policies that have not enabled a better life for all Tunisians. Unfortunately, the free youth's retreat and lack of physical presence cede the arena to other forces to occupy it and to claim they represent Tunisian society.

Beyond this transformation in political interest—through emphasis on theoretical, dogmatic, and cultural issues and avoidance of concrete matters in building a true democracy—the result is that those supportive of the caliphate have already accomplished a quiet penetration of state institutions.

Instead of being used as a tool for field activity, social media has become an activity of limited benefit, cut off from Tunisian society. Meanwhile, this deficit in democracy is increasing and widening between the free, open generation of young men and women and the national institutions that are forming and developing without this generation taking a critical role in their formation.

The demographic opportunity of the new Tunisia—a young country in the wake of a popular and promising revolution, with an educated generation capable of building a promising future—has changed into a time bomb capable of exploding in the face of the peddlers of illusion in this world and the next. All this is happening in the shadow of the failure of successive governments to create new hope in Tunisia. While the best of its youth and activists long for a development model that provides democratic and participatory foundations and stable growth, Tunisia continues to fail its elites and to daily offer its youth bona fide reasons for emigrating from its failures.

The democratic deficit cannot be described as merely a stage, but rather it is a pervasive threat that must be addressed. The cure, of which the youth of Tunisia must be aware, will not come from a patriarchal country that this youth has rejected in word and deed, but it also is not by withdrawal and isolating the public space to ideologies that descend into deadly illusions. Rather, the prescription is for a visible return of these youth to civic work capable of realizing the priorities of the rising generation: harmonization of education and training with opportunities for productive work and strengthening the national economy on a framework of individual initiative. The goal is neither to try to take over the country, nor to relinquish the responsibility to rally behind the banner of economic freedom.

But young Tunisians need a supportive hand from both inside Tunisia and internationally. The achievement of the Tunisian Revolution certainly does not give permission to any party to seize power or launch a coup—power must be gained fairly and legally. There is also an important role for the international community, especially after it first supported the patriarchal system and then energetically supported change, before finally losing its enthusiasm and retreating. It must now practice its role consistently and regularly to help realize the promise of Tunisia.

The first responsibility of Tunisian youth is to face the issues of life and avoid fleeing from them, either towards the illusions of the caliphate or towards the dream world of virtual reality. They are concerned about employment, security, the environment, and political stability, and whenever these issues are raised, the debate must take a practical form that transcends doctrinal considerations. What Tunisia needs is more practical planning and less ideological discussion. ❖

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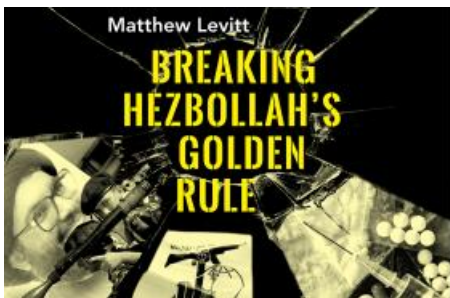
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