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**The Power of a T-shirt:
Youth Activism and the Civic Space in Tunisia**

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Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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List of Acronyms

CDC	Civic Driven Change
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EU	European Union
FTDES	Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (French acronym)
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISIE	Independent Higher Authority for Elections (French acronym)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NCA	National Constitute Assembly
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NIS	National Integrity System

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Abstract

Tunisian youth took the streets in 2011 demanding employment, social justice, and civic liberties. As youth were able to overthrow decades of authoritarian rule, it is valid to examine how youth continues to challenge power structures in the revolution aftermath. This research explores youth activism in Tunisia and their capacity to generate socio-political change particularly in fighting corruption in governmental institutions. The study draws on a vast number of literatures regarding youth, activism, and civic space in order to problematize and conceptualize each of these terminologies. The paper presents a civic-driven change framework to analyse empirical data collected on three youth activist groups situated in the civic space: I-Watch, Manich-Msamah, and the Pirate-Party. The analysis of fieldwork stories focuses on four themes: (1) conceptualization of civic space in Tunisia, (2) the youthfulness narrative, (3) local and global connectedness offline and online, and (4) the citizenship discourse. At the end, the paper highlights how youth activists' consciousness, shared identity, and autonomous agency are shaping their actions, enabling them to pressure the government.

Relevance to Development Studies

The study contributes to the field of youth activism as it focuses on the power of youth to change complex political and social realities. In the case of Tunisia, youth feel the ownership of the 2011 revolution and the urge to protect its gains, therefore they are claiming their own space in the political scene and coming up with innovative actions to voice their demands for a 'just society'.

Keywords

Youth, activism, civic space, agency, change, corruption, Tunisia

1. Mapping The Scene

This chapter is a short roadmap that sets the stage for the reader about the structure of the research paper. It clarifies my stance and how that triggered my interest in this research topic, and then provides a brief introduction about the research context that later on materializes into the research problem and research questions, and concludes with a detailed section on methodology.

1.1 From where I stand

Either we call it the Arab Spring, revolution, or uprising, what started in Tunisia changed the country and the entire MENA region. The transitional justice process in the country is not flawless, yet it is the most prominent compared to the situation in Egypt, Libya, Syria or Yemen where war and violence persist. Since 2011, Tunisia democratic trajectory has been full of ups and downs but continued moving forward aiming for a democratic, free and just society.

I used to work with INGOs focusing on youth empowerment, and after 2011 there were massive development programs that focused on youth and democratic change, which granted me several opportunities to connect with youth activists from the MENA and particularly Tunisia. As I travelled to Tunisia several times for short work missions and trainings, I was able to establish a youth network in the country. In this vein, I continued to explore post-revolution Tunisia through the authentic updates and reflections from its youth. I am particularly interested in youth activists-government relationship, and in the case of Tunisia I was fascinated by the activist groups capacity to mobilize and the creativity of their actions to challenge authorities. This used to be a forbidden area under authoritarian regimes, and therefore I decided to dedicate my research paper to this topic in order to better understand their work approaches that influenced the democratic trajectory of the country. Tunisia inspired the region to topple dictators, but I believe there is so much to learn from this experience beyond the revolution spark.

1.2 Connecting the dots

The Arab Spring discourse was often described as youth-led (Herrera 2014: 3, Murphy 2012: 6). Youth in Tunisia led the street protests against the corrupted regime of Ben Ali demanding better economic opportunities, civil liberties and social justice. After the revolution, the impetus of youth was misplaced in the transition process due to the dissatisfaction with the new political powers in charge (Roberts 2015:958, Marks 2013: 110). When the majority of youth stepped away from traditional politics (represented by political parties and elections) they did not remain silent, on the contrary, they “created their own space

and interventions” to interact with the state (Honwana 2013: 11). Following this transition, I wanted to explore further the newly created space along with the capacity of these actions in generating change, because the energy that overthrew hierarchal regimes cannot fade shortly after such a remarkable milestone.

Digital space is one of the significant spaces for youth activism even before the Arab Spring; the Iranian revolution in 2009 was called a “Twitter revolution” due to the crucial role Twitter played in communication and mobilizations of the movement (Seegerberg & Bennett 2011: 198). The spread of smartphone use, Internet accessibility and social media applications enhanced the use of digital spaces for activism. Certainly social media and blogging played a key role in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, for example the Egyptian revolution was referred to as a “Facebook Revolution” (Hofheinz 2011: 27) and ‘Revolution 2.0’ (Attia et al. 2011: 369). Yet there were several sceptical voices that challenged the role of social media especially in post-revolution era (Hofheinz 2011: 27), but for Herrera, Arab citizens were alternating between online and offline spaces (Herrera 2014: 3), and that helped them organizing for protests and gain broader support. The question here is, what are these offline spaces?

Several literatures indicated that Tunisian youth shifted away from traditional politics to civil society (Honwana 2013: 69, Deane 2013:8). During Ben Ali rule, civil society was limited to youth centres that are managed by the government, unions and few charities, but when the regime was ousted a massive booming of civil society occurred. In 2016, Al-Kawakibi Democracy Transition Centre¹ estimated the presence of 18,000 active civil society organizations in Tunisia (Al-Kawakibi 2016: 3). In its report, Al-Kawakibi praised the potential of civil society to generate change in the country, embracing its important role in the national dialogue and receiving the Noble Peace Prize in 2015 (Al-Kawakibi 2016: 11). Despite the civil society capacity to organize and generate change, the concept of civil society itself is often contested. As a result of this, I searched for a broader conceptualization of space that combines both online and offline platforms and includes a wider variety of actors’ in which they can exercise their power and generate change. That led me to the concept of ‘civic space’ that acknowledges citizens’ energy and also accommodates different institutions such as street movements, political parties, NGOs, etc.

Once I was able to delineate the space for youth activism, I wanted to analyse activist actions that are generated at the civic space in order to better understand their capacity to trigger change. Various academics referred to the new forms of youth activism replacing the traditional ones (voting and engagement in political parties) such as signing petitions, participating in protest (Barrett &

¹ A non-governmental Arab-regional organization

Brunton-Smith 2014: 6), or the use of social media and volunteering (UNDP 2014: 19). Nonetheless, these are just examples of actions but they do not explain their capacity to trigger change.

Since change is a very broad concept -especially in a country that is going through a democratic change process- I focused my research on actions that demand change against corruption in governmental institutions. Corruption is one of the deeply rooted problems that hindered development in Tunisia before the revolution, particularly economically. The ruling family controlled all businesses and that made it difficult for youth to seek jobs or start their own business (Honwana 2013: 31-2). Therefore, after the revolution several youth activists' organizations played the role of watchdogs to monitor the government transparency and accountability (Al-Kawakibi 2016: 3). This new mandate presented a new type of interaction between youth activists and the government, and also a new form of actions.



Figure 01: Graffiti in a street in Tunis, says "All corruption roads lead to the royal palace". Photo source Manich-Msamah Facebook page

1.3 Research problem

Connecting the previous dots together, youth were the main catalyst of the Tunisian revolution, but after the revolution the majority of youth shifted away from traditional politics to new online and offline spaces to express their demands. This research situates youth activism in the broader civic space in order to capture youth actions in multiple locations and analyses how these work approaches are able to generate socio-political change. The focus is particularly on the field of government accountability, which is a public cause that affects all Tunisian citizens.

It is important to mention here that this paper does not generalize activism among all youth in Tunisia, youth apathy does exist and is partially reflected through the disengagement in traditional politics, also in the low engagement of youth in civil society (World Bank 2014: 17). Nevertheless, the conceptualization of civic space provides a wider framework to capture youth who are

engaged in activism but do not quantify them. Additionally, the generational narrative appears strongly in this research, but it will be addressed through its influence in shaping youth actions. In sum, this paper is dedicated to better understand the capacity of youth activist group actions to pressure the government through the civic space in Tunisia.

1.4 Research question and sub-questions

The central research question is: How do Tunisian youth activist groups use the civic space to pressure the government and generate change?

The research will explore the following sub-questions:

- How are youth activist groups situated within the civic space?
- What are the remarkable features of the actions of the youth activist groups?
- How do youth activist groups interact with local and global actors?
- How is the relationship between youth activist groups and the government?

1.5 Methodology

In order to answer these questions I am using a case study methodology with an ethnographic orientation. I mainly used case study methodology because it is suitable for studying contemporary events (Yin 2014: 14), and it also helps to capture 'dense' data through examining few examples, which leads to a deeper understanding of the situation (Della Porta 2008: 204). Ethnographic methodology is suitable as well to focus on few cases in order to generate in-depth knowledge of the situation (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 3), but since I spent approximately six weeks doing my fieldwork, I was concerned that time will not be enough to collect sufficient ethnographic data. As case study and ethnography share the earlier described feature, I found it suitable to combine both methodologies to fulfil the research objective and overcome time limitation. Hence, I chose to focus on three cases only but with multiple units of analysis including use of digital media, relationship with regional and international actors, mobilization of young people inside and outside the capital, etc. This trade-off between breadth and depth generates more knowledge about the selected cases, yet it limits the generalizability of the research results. From an ethnographic standpoint, the research design is shaped by the researcher objectivity, positionality, and reflexivity and that differs from a researcher to another, therefore it is seldom to be generalized. Nonetheless, the results might be generalized based on the theoretical proposition of the research.

The population of this research consists of youth activist groups that operate within the constructed civic space in the revolution aftermath in Tunisia. As the research is strongly influenced by the notion of space; I based my cases selection on Gaventa (2006) 'Power Cube' framework, and searched for youth activist groups that operate in spaces they created themselves in relation to lo-

cal, national, and international connections. Following this, I selected three diverse cases, which are: *I-Watch* (a youth-led NGO), *The Tunisian Pirate-Party* (a political party) and *Manich-Msamah- I will not forgive* (a social movement). The three activist groups are: youth-driven, formed or registered after the revolution, launched in the capital Tunis but with a network across the country, and advocating for a public cause. Yet, each case demonstrates distinct forms of activism, functions on different power levels, and diverges in their relations with global actors. In terms of physical space, the research is limited to studying youth activist groups who are based in Tunis (the capital) due to financial and time constraints, but to overcome this I selected groups that are based in the capital but with a national scope of work.

For data collection, I used triangulation between documentation, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The documents were mainly academic literatures, international and local agencies reports relevant to the research topic. I gathered participatory observations through joining youth activist groups in protests, meetings, workplaces and local cafés. For example, LibrThé café² was one of the main places where I collected observations and conducted interviews, because many youth activists spend their time there. I also used digital ethnography while monitoring youth activist groups on Facebook pages. Following these observations I was able to identify interviewees from the three cases I selected, yet it was difficult to affiliate them to a single group because many of the interviewees are engaged with more than one youth activist groups. I interviewed twenty activists (10 females and 10 males) who occupy different roles in each group (not only formal leadership positions). Since my fieldwork was based in Tunis, I used several opportunities to interview youth activists who live in other governorates when they visited the capital. Moreover, I interviewed Youssef Cherif, a Tunisian political analyst, who wrote several articles on youth activism and fighting corruption in Tunisia. In the appendices section I added a list of interviewees' names, affiliation, referenced with time and location. The list of interviewees along with data triangulation intends to strengthen the internal validity and reliability of the research and ensure objectivity of data collection (Yin 2014: 118).

Regarding data analysis, the research is strongly relying on theoretical propositions (Yin 2014: 136), starting from conceptualization of youth, activism, civic space, and then the CDC framework, which guided the analysis of collected data and also reinforces the internal validity of the research.

During my fieldwork I openly declared my status as a researcher. My initial access point was I-Watch organization as I already had an established connection with its members; they played the role of the gatekeeper and connected me with the other two cases. When a friend recommended to me Manich-Msamah

² LibrThé café is a cultural café at Lafayette-Tunis

as one of the research cases, he warned me that the movement might not accept to talk to a foreign researcher, but when I met with Asma Sabri from I-Watch and told her that I want to contact Manich-Msamah she immediately connected me with them through a phone call that resulted in a scheduled interview on the next day. I found it fascinating how youth activists would open up though they did not know me but because they trusted who introduced me to them. This space of trust allowed me to observe the genuine details of youth activists' work and interactions that could not be captured through formal interviews.

In this research I faced a number of technical and ethical challenges, mainly in relation to language, positionality and youth activists' safety. Tunisia official language is Arabic, but as a French colonized country French was integrated in spoken Tunisian language (*derja*), which is relatively different from Middle-Eastern Arabic (where I come from). I also did not want to conduct the interviews in English to avoid narrowing down the research population to 'popular' activists who are English speakers with an international exposure; therefore I conducted the majority of interviews in a combination of classical and spoken Arabic. The second challenge was related to my positionality as an activist and a youth worker from the Arab region. When I drafted my research topic, I had a privileged access to youth activist groups with whom I had previous contacts; therefore I was concerned about how these pre-established relations would affect information sharing and participants' behaviours. As a result, I included only one youth activist group that I knew before, while I had no previous contact with the other two cases. The third challenge was regarding safety and consent, as the research is focused on youth activists and their relationship with the government I was worried about writing any information that might put them at risk. To avoid this, I asked interviewees approval before listing their names, and I also verified with them certain quotes or incidences that I suspected to be unsafe.

1.6 Structure

This research paper is structured in the following manner: In Chapter Two, I am bringing different literature on youth, activism, and civic space in attempt to problematize and conceptualize each of these terms and reflect them on the case of Tunisia, and then I am introducing the Civic-Driven Change (CDC) framework, underlining how it corresponds to the notion of civic space and how it will help analyse the collected data. While Chapter Three outlines key events and milestones that occurred in Tunisia after the revolution to set the context of the research, followed by a detailed description of the cases I studied during my fieldwork. Chapter Four gathers a number of stories that I collected throughout my research, along with brief reflections on how these events inform my research inquires. In Chapter Five, I am applying an analytical perspective at these stories through the CDC framework, which emerged

into four themes: (1) conceptualization of civic space in Tunisia, (2) youthfulness narrative, (3) local and global connectedness of youth activists online and offline, and (4) the citizenship discourse. At the end, I am bringing all of these elements together trying to articulate how would all of that respond to my research question.

To recap, I started this chapter by stating my standpoint as a researcher that influenced the selection of the research topic, and then I introduced the Tunisian context through which I formulated the research problem and research question, followed by a detailed methodology section, and concluded with the structure of this research paper. In this chapter I intended to map out a comprehensive scene to help better understand the flow of the research before moving to the theoretical section.

2. Youth, Activism and Civic Space through a CDC Framework

This research is based on three main concepts: *youth*, *activism*, and *civic space*. None of these concepts have a fixed definition, therefore I will start this chapter by problematizing and conceptualizing each of these terminologies, and then I will introduce the CDC framework explaining how it corresponds to the notion of civic space and how it will help analyse the collected data.

2.1. Problematizing youth

The Arab Spring movements were broadly described as youth-led, but what does the word “youth” mean? Murphy (2012: 7) criticized literatures about youth in the Arab Spring because they presented youth as a normative category. Often youth are being categorized based on chronological age, but this portrays them as a universal homogeneous cohort. UNDP 2014-2017 youth strategy identified ‘youth’ between the age of 15-24, yet they suggested the possibility to extend it to 30-35 which takes into consideration the influence of complex social realities on youth in various communities (UNDP 2014: 47). Social realities are shaped by various aspects such as class, urban/rural, gender, culture, and Internet connectedness, which lead to uneven experiences for youth (Bayat and Herrera 2010: 7), and also manifest differently in their expressions and actions. Consequently, understanding youth as a social structure rejects framing them into a fixed global definition, and gives researchers the space to formulate an authentic conceptualization of youth within a specific setting that takes into consideration their environment and behaviour. For instance youth in the Arab Spring were often described as educated and unemployed (Honwana 2013: 11, Kiwan 2015: 131, Marks 2013: 110). Additionally, social media, rap music and graffiti played a major role during and after the revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, which indicates the youthfulness of their means of expression and the influence of globalization on them.

Youth studies had two perspectives on youth that are best described by the Comaroffs as ‘makers and breakers’, which means that youth can be seen as prospective hope or source of troubles (2005: 22). The increased focus on youth as an asset was initiated by the UN (Ansell 2017: 36), and aimed to encourage governments to invest in youth for a better future, yet the time spent in preparing youth for the future resulted in a waiting period. Dhillon and Yousef identified three institutions necessary to complete the transition from childhood to adulthood in the Arab region: education, employment and family formation (Dhillon and Yousef 2009 in Murphy 2012: 9), and as I mentioned earlier Arab youth were described as educated, unemployed and consequently they lacked the financial stability to establish a family (Honwana 2013: 12). This prolonged the wait-hood period for youth, and also elevated their feeling

of grievance as the government failed to address their demands (Silveira 2015: 19). In addition to economic instability, government oppression and violation of freedom and civic rights intensified youth frustration.

Youth are also categorized through a generational narrative but not necessary determined by age, for example Herrera conceptualized Arab youth as a “wired generation” because of Internet connectivity (2014: 6). For Edmunds and Turner, a generation is constructed by “the interaction between historical resources, contingent circumstances and social formation” (2002: 7), which links us back to the impact of complex social realities on shaping youth mutual identity and actions. Mannheim formulated the generational theory based on three elements: ‘generation as actuality’, ‘generational location’, and ‘fate’ (Mannheim 1997 in Edmunds & Turner 2002: 10), if we look at these elements as a timeline they can be interpreted respectively to past, present and future experiences. This implies that a generation is influenced by shared historical experiences and current realities and that might suggests a deterministic outlook of a generation, but the future element acknowledges youth agency capacity to change current realities and thus leaves the future unpredictable. Murphy described Arab youth generation as a product of system failure that disregarded youth agency and marginalized them (2012: 18), which led youth to protest against authoritarian rulers and changed their realities.

As a result of this, it is important to look at youth beyond numerical age and approach them as a fluid cohort shaped by local and global past, present and future experiences. This research does not perceive youth as a fixed homogeneous category; it broadly recognizes Tunisian youth, both male and female, who carry prominent agency, and feel the ownership of the revolution and the responsibility to protect the revolution gains.

“The revolution was led by youth, Bouazizi himself was young, and who protested after his death were mainly youth. When I look back to the previous five years I realize that we lost a lot! Look at the age range of the state officials who took the lead after our youth-led revolution; El-Cebssi is in his nineties! Personally I no longer accept to lose any battle such as the one against the reconciliation law, I believe that we should win the small battles in order to win the biggest one which is to see a better Tunisia led by its youth”³ Mouafek Zouari

2.2. Politicizing participation: Activism

Initially I was focusing on the concept of youth participation but it was often merged with other concepts such as civic engagement, political participation and activism. In 1965 the UN started promoting for youth participation (Ansell 2017: 218), and since then many development agencies adopted youth partici-

³ Interview with Mouafek Zouari

pation and empowerment in their agendas. Nevertheless, various literatures made a clear distinction between political and civic participation (Barrett & Brunton-Smith 2014: 6, Shaw et al. 2014: 302); the term political participation was coupled with activities that influence power, while civic participation was eroded from power and described as a generic voluntary activity. This distinction questioned the work of international development agencies with youth, and accused them of depoliticizing youth participation (Leal 2010: 91). To counteract this, Hickey and Mohan proposed to conceptualize participation “in terms of an expanded and radicalized understanding of citizenship” (2005: 238). In this view, the concept of participation is controversial; it can be employed to challenge power, and equally it can be used to inhibit resistance.

Contrary to participation, activism was often associated with power. Ansell described activism as a political act that challenges hierarchal structures (Ansell 2017: 230, 234). In the context of the Arab world, Cavatorta (2012: 78) described activism as any type of engagement that aims to challenge authoritarian regime. This conceptualization denotes the power of activism, which resonates with political participation in meaning and holds less controversial connotation.

Combining together the two concepts of youth and activism can lead to an erroneous conceptualization of youth as only males. In the Arab spring male and female activists protested in the streets and on the cyber space, yet female activists suffered an additional pressure from the society and from the state in attempt to shut down their voices. Tunisia showcases an advanced status of women rights compared to other Arab states, and these rights were nurtured by both Bourgiba⁴ and Ben Ali regimes, nevertheless their feminist approach was driven by economic development plans and foreign diplomacy motives (Burgess et al. 2013: 397, Debuysere 2015: 234). It is important to emphasize here on the contribution of female activists in the change process, and the further oppression they face as females even under pro-feminist regimes.

A person’s activism is evoked by increased consciousness that is shaped through life experiences. In Kwon’s research on Asian and Pacific Islander youth activists in USA, he (2008: 1) argued that experiencing inequality affects individual consciousness and results into a collective action against the situation. Looking back at the Tunisian revolution, social and economical inequalities evoked people’s consciousness and led them to street protests. While after the revolution, youth activism continued but this time in order to prevent the previous oppressive government from returning (Martin 2015: 801). Additionally, they adopted non-hierarchal work structures to avoid the bureaucracy they experienced earlier (Herrera 2014: 6, Marks 2013: 110). In other words, shared

⁴ Bourgiba is Tunisia first president

identities, realities and hopes bring youth activists together and unite their power against hierarchal regimes.

2.3. Conceptualizing civic space

Civic space is relatively a new concept that emerged to overcome the contestation and weakness of civil society as a concept and analytical tool (Fowler & Biekart 2013: 463, Härdig 2015: 1132). According to CIVICUS, the civil society is “the arena, outside of family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests” (CIVICUS in Al-Kawakibi 2016: 11). Initially, the civil society concept was criticized for being framed as a separate sector in the society model (state, market, civil society). Edwards suggested an alternative view of the society model with fluid boundaries instead of three-segregated sectors, in which citizens can operate at different sectors at different times (2009:24). Likewise, Biekart and Fowler argued in favour of this model as they look at the society as a political project, therefore power is not concentrated in one sector, according to them citizens in a society are in a continuous motion across all sectors and they can exercise this power at any point (2012: 182). Secondly, the civil society concept was often narrowed down to NGOs (TNI 2017: 3), and that disregarded the contribution of other actors in the field such as social movements and unregistered groups (Tandon & David Brown 2013: 603). NGOs were often accused of sacrificing their autonomy to satisfy international donors agenda instead of local needs (Leal 2010: 91), and that stigma expanded to the entire civil society as a result of this association. Finally, The wording of civil society is problematic because it only acknowledges the civility of a society and neglects uncivil actions (Biekart and Fowler 2012: 183). For instance, Bouazizi’s self-immolation might be considered ‘uncivil’ yet he ignited the change process in the MENA region. As a result of this, there was a crucial need to redefine civil society and overcome these shortcomings.

Recent literatures started to redefine the concept of civil society and initiated a discourse of “new” civil society (Deane 2013:12, Härdig 2015: 1132), which is often combined with political reforms such as the Arab Spring (Gready & Robins 2017: 3, Härdig 2015: 1133). The “new” conceptualization of civil society addressed the limitation of the old concept, for instance Härdig (2015: 1134-5) proposed a new typology of civil society with vague boundaries between the civil and political sphere, which adopted a Gramscian mindset that views the civil society as a space for political collaboration and contestation. Gready and Robins (2017: 11) described civil society as “organisations and institutions and ‘spaces’ of social relations which mediate between the individual and the state”, the use of the word ‘space’ opened a broader dimension to accommodate new actors. Moreover, Härdig (2015: 1132) pointed out the potential incivility of the ‘new’ civil society. The ‘new’ civil society discourse demonstrates the coherent efforts to overcome the shortcomings of the tradi-

tional civil society, but it might not be able to overcome the negative perception of the concept.

One of the key features of the 'new' civil society is 'space'. For Gaventa (2006: 26) a space is where citizens can act and possibly generate change, and he classified spaces into: invited spaces, created spaces, and closed spaces. Reflecting this on the 'new' civil society conceptualization, it is a space for citizens action to generate social, economical and political change, and citizens are no longer limited to 'invited spaces' (traditional civil society), they are moving towards an autonomous 'created spaces' through which they can challenge 'closed spaces' and demand transparency (Gaventa 2006: 26-7). This interpretation does not aim to glamorize the notion of space, because it can be equally politicized or depoliticized based on how citizens utilize it (TNI 2017: 3). This brings to the discussion the role of human agency in utilizing the space into full capacity across the three categories (invited, created, and closed spaces) instead of settling in 'invited space' only.

The concept 'civic space' appeared in a number of literatures along with the discussions on the new civil society (Malena 2015: 27). CIVICUS stated on their website:

“When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organisations are able to organise, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions.” (CIVICUS 2017).

This conceptualization of civic space resolves several shortcomings of the civil society concept because it broadly opens to citizens (Malena 2015: 14), and clearly the word civic solves the language limitation of 'civility' and includes both civil and uncivil actions. Additionally it brings all actors power to the same level in which government and citizens both perform their duties and exercise their rights, but the use of citizenship narrative neglects non-citizens power in the civic space. Accordingly, this research frames civic space as a conceptual, physical and virtual space in which society members organize and act to generate socio-political change.

In Tunisia, civil society enabled youth to engage in politics but it continues to face challenges due to the conflicted political ideologies, international and governmental fund and centralization (Silveira 2015: 22-3). The civil society concept remains vague and contested especially when it comes to funding. For example Youssef Cherif identified civil society as any formal and informal organization that are autonomous from the state, but he elaborated that unfor-

tunately many civil society organizations do receive fund from the state⁵. Whilst Charfiddien had a radical perspective on the civil society, he identified it as a “space for resistance” therefore he considered foreign funding as a “form of colonization”⁶. Aside from the civil society, streets and digital platforms were also spaces for activism and confrontation in Tunisia (Murphy 2012:11). In this vein, civil society, streets, cafés, and digital platforms are all parts of the civic space in which citizens exercise their power.

The politicization of civic space and its capacity to challenge power structures puts it under agitated risk. According to CIVICUS, the increased pressure on civic space is due to its successful capacity in generating change (2016: 136). The clampdown of civic space drives society members to look for innovative means of organizing (Youngs 2017: 4), hence the civic space continuously changes based on context, actors, their actions, and eventually the response of challenged powers.

Based on this argument, civic space has the capacity to generate change, but how can this be captured and analysed?

2.4. Civic-Driven Change framework (CDC)

The CDC framework offers an analytical tool that focuses on the capacity of human agency to generate change through: understanding what triggers citizens to act, and how these actions are shaping the future (Biekart & Fowler 2012: 181). As this research aims to better understand the capacity of youth activists in Tunisia to generate change, CDC serves as a suitable framework to help unpack the research problem.

Fowler & Biekart established the CDC framework on four propositions on society and citizenship (2011: 15), which corresponds to the framing of civic space. The first proposition recognizes the power of people action/inaction in all aspects of life, and the impact of these action/inaction on the entire society. The second proposition centralizes the analysis around civic agency and addresses the grounded interpretation of the word civic into “pro-social behavior” act, however it does not neglect uncivil action capacity to change. The third proposition is concerned with solutions that are shaped by desired futures and invented by citizens themselves. The final proposition refers to the complexity of socio-political change processes, which leads to uncertain outcomes that do not necessarily achieve what was intended initially. Therefore, the CDC framework meets with the conceptualization of civic space at different points: both view the society as a ‘political project’ instead of three segregated sectors (Biekart & Fowler 2012: 186), and recognize the capacity of citizens’ action (both civil and uncivil) to generate change.

⁵ Interview with Youssef Cherif

⁶ Interview with Charfiddien Elkelil

Civic agency is a fundamental element of the CDC framework. The idea of agency is concerned with individuals and groups' actions (and concurrently in-action) and what energizes them (Fowler & Biekart 2011: 20). According to CDC, civic agency is associated with citizenship because citizens are entitled to a set of rights and duties, and their agency comes into practice through the way they exercise these rights and duties in organizing their everyday life (Fowler & Biekart 2011: 21-2). Edwards (2009: 68) explained civic agency through the concept of active citizenship that is practiced deliberately and continuously. For example, Youngs (2017: 17) recognized "many new civic groups in the MENA region are focusing on their own agency and very specific concerns", which reinforces the autonomous choices of these civic groups. On another aspect, if civic agency is tied to citizenship, then the framework neglects non-citizens (such as immigrants and refugees) agency because they are not entitled to the same set of rights and duties. Despite this limitation of the CDC framework, it is still applicable to use in this research as it focuses on Tunisian citizens.

The framework also addresses what triggers or energizes civic agency to take action. Civic energy is what drives people to collaborate together towards a common goal, and this can be generated by several factors including shared experiences and raised consciousness (Biekart & Fowler 2012: 184-5). The Arab Spring is an example of how the experience of inequality and oppression evoked individual and collective agency and encouraged citizens to protest against authoritarian regimes. Personally, I was curious to understand why would youth activists would risk their safety and stand up in the face of the government, which I will elaborate further in the upcoming chapters.

Along with the four propositions, Biekart & Fowler (2012: 186-8) presented four lenses to analyze socio-political change, they are:

Table 01: The CDC Framework Four Lenses

The Lenses	Explanation
<i>The politics of belonging</i>	establishes the relationship between citizens and the state and emphasizes the rights that citizens actually enjoy and practice.
<i>The politics of action</i>	focuses on how civic agency is energized to act based on their previous experiences and future hopes.
<i>The politics of scale</i>	tackles the possibility of expansion across local, national, and global levels, and that provides an opportunity for innovation to grow beyond a specific time or location.
<i>The politics of knowledge and communication</i>	considers the ability of people to use their own knowledge and experiences to change despite the indeterminate results, it also takes into consideration foreign interventions influence on the change processes.

In reality the lenses are not neatly structured as presented, during the analysis I started applying each lens separately but they interplayed and overlapped in a way that reflected the complexity of the situation yet it helped better understand it. Additionally, the lenses are not supposed to be equally utilized, the four lenses were useful in this research analysis but the politics of belonging and the politics of action were the most relevant.

The framework unpacks the complexity of socio-political change processes, while it also expands to capture globalization effect on the process (Biekart & Fowler 2012: 182). This research explores change driven by youth activist groups from the bottom to the top, but certain factors such as human rights, citizenship, development programs, foreign donors, technology and Internet are all global factors that influence youth activism on the local level and consequently socio-political change processes. This research does not aim to evaluate the impact of globalization as positive or negative, however it acknowledges the impact of globalization on citizens' realities and future.

Combining the four propositions and the four lenses of CDC provide a comprehensive framework to understand socio-political change generated by civic agency. Though it overcomes several limitations of the civil society framework, yet it does have its own limitations. In addition to the challenges I mentioned earlier, the framework is gender-blind, for example when I wanted to examine female youth activism I could hardly fit it under the politics of belonging, yet it could have been easily unnoticed as the gender element is absent in the framework.

In this chapter I started with problematizing and conceptualizing youth, activism and the civic space, then presented the CDC framework as an analytical tool to analyze socio-political change. It might be early to detect socio-political change in Tunisia; nevertheless CDC offers an inclusive framework to better understand complex processes of socio-political change generated through the civic space. However, both concepts (civic space and CDC) remain relatively new and therefore open for contestation and improvement.

3. Situating Youth in the Revolution Aftermath

In this chapter I am outlining key events and milestones that occurred in Tunisia after the revolution, followed by a detailed description of the cases I selected in order to illuminate the research problem.

3.1. A quick review

After the departure of Ben Ali, an interim government was formed to facilitate the transitional process, yet this government faced an agitated rejection especially among youth activists because of the political affiliation of its members (Honwana 2013: 100). The interim government was headed by El-Ghanouchi who was forced to resign due to streets pressure, and he was replaced by Caid Essebsi; a former minister during Bourguiba rule (Allagui & Kuebler 2011: 1438, Murphy 2011: 303, Honwana 2013: 102). Youth were often described as the key catalyst of the revolution, but youth representation in traditional politics arena in the post-revolution period was symbolic. Very few youth took part in governmental institutions, and those who participated were mainly the iconic figures of the revolution (Honwana 2013: 105). For instance, Slim Amamou (a cyber activist) was the youngest interim government member, who was appointed as the Secretary of State for Sport and Youth (Allagui & Kuebler 2011: 1438), but Slim anticipated the government intentions behind his selection, he explained “When they invited me to entre the lion’s den I could not say no! I saw an opportunity and seized it, but I entered as a stranger who was a big mistake for them to recruit. Actually it was harder than I thought that is why I resigned after four months.”⁷

In October 2011, Tunisia organized the first elections after the revolution but surprisingly the voting rate was distinctively low especially among young people (Honwana 2013: 137). Youth representation was also low in the elected National Constituent Assembly (NCA), only 4% of the 217 members were under the age of 30, and 76% were over the age of 50 (Silveira 2015: 20). Ennahdha (Islamic political party) won 89 seats of the NCA (Honwana 2013: 138), which gave them power to shape the NCA decisions. Since then, Tunisia continued to witness a restless conflicted political scene controlled by party politics, and that was an additional reason to push away youth from traditional politics. Partially youth were excluded from traditional political as they were framed into deterministic roles, nevertheless many youth took their own decision to boycott traditional politics and created their own means of political expression. For example, I-Watch conducted a stimulation of the NCA in which the 217 seats were occupied by youth, and after the stimulation they compiled

⁷ Interview with Slim Amamou

legislative recommendations and presented them to the actual NCA members (Silveira 2015: 22).

The civil society is one of the newly created spaces for youth activism in Tunisia. Under Ben Ali regime, Tunisian civil society was constrained in number and mandate (Deane 2013:8). Youth centres were established and managed by the government across the country, the regime launched them in attempt to distract youth in art and cultural activities and keep them away from politics, yet youth used this space to learn new means of expression and build networks (Honwana 2013: 114-5). Perhaps this can explain how art activism (such as graffiti and rap music) was used to mask and convey political messages among Tunisian youth. After 2011, the Tunisian civil society went through rapid changes, and the government passed the Decree-Law No. 2011-88 that aims to regulate the civil society work. The law articles advocated for civil principals such as democracy and human rights and prohibited uncivil acts such as violence and hate speech (Martin 2015: 802). As a result of this, around 18,000 civil society organizations were registered in Tunisia by the year 2016 (Al-Kawakibi 2016: 3). The expansion of the number of civil society organizations was also accompanied with expansion of the work domain, “many CSOs tend to act as lobbyists, watchdogs against corruption, or educators of citizens’ rights” (Silveira 2015: 21). The evolvement of this particular scope is associated with the rooted corruption in Tunisia dominated by the ruling family and business elites, which deprived youth from accessing economic opportunities (Honwana 2013: 32). Overall, the Tunisian civil society provided a prominent space to generate change; nevertheless it faced criticism because of centralizations, international funds, and political affiliation (Silveira 2015: 22-3).

In October 2014 Tunisia conducted their second elections, this time Nidaa Tounes (secular political party) won the plurality of seats. 37% of youth (18-35 years) registered for 2014 elections, which is slightly higher compared to 2011 elections (ISIE 2015: 21). The party founder Caid Essebsi became the president of the country as a result of these elections. On a side note, this year Essebsi turns 91 years old (Lefèvre 2015: 308), and that raises a serious concern about youth in traditional politics, not only in terms of representation but also in holding leadership positions. In 2015, Essebsi proposed the economic reconciliation law claiming that this will help improve the environment for investments, but the only proposed bill by the president triggered conflicted reactions and brought back street protests because many activists believe that the law contradicts with the social justice trajectory in the country (Guellali 2017). Additionally, Nidaa Tounes was accused of bringing back old regime figures into power (Boubekeur 2016: 116, Lefèvre 2015: 308). For these reasons, several activist groups were sceptical about the intentions of Nidaa Tounes, and they started to advocate against corruption within governmental institutions and against the reconciliation law specifically.

This year the Tunisian government brought back a number of evocative laws on the discussion table, which created a tense situation between activist groups and the government. The reconciliation law was not the only law youth activists were protesting, the suggested amendments on the civil society Law and the proposed bill on deterring attacks on security personnel are also alarming indicators of government attempts to concentrate the power back in the government hand. Looking at the bigger picture, the political scene in Tunisia reflects the vigorously complex relationship between citizens and the government. The polar political environment forced youth to shift their activism to new spaces, and they continued to monitor and challenge the government through these spaces. In order to understand this complexity, I focused on youth activist groups who are operating at different locations of the civic space, and working towards a cause that is concerned with public good. Therefore, I selected the following youth activist groups:

3.2. Three cases - One mission

- *I-Watch*⁸: A youth-led national NGO that works on transparency and fighting corruption. The organization was launched in 2011 by Tunisian youth activists, which started at the capital and later on expanded nationwide. The organization is strongly affiliated with international agencies such as transparency International, National Democratic Institute (NDI) and ActionAid. I was particularly interested in I-Watch5; which is a bank account of I-Watch staff and member donations to fund the organization autonomous activities. The key characteristics of I-Watch work: creativity, immediacy of actions in responding to the socio-political events, and the instrumentalization of social media to advocate for their work.

- *Manich-Msamah*⁹ ('I will not forgive'): a local social movement that emerged in 2015 advocating against the reconciliation Law. Due to their mass mobilization the proposed law was subjected to several amendments and changed from economical to administrative reconciliation law. The outstanding characteristics of this group: the absence of hierarchal leadership, mass mobilization through social media, and the outspread of the movement across the country.

- *Pirate-Party*¹⁰ ('Parti Pirate Tunisie'): The party was established during Ben Ali regime, however the Ministry of Interior denied its registration until 2012. It is part of the global Pirate Party movement, which started in Sweden in 2006. I found out about the Pirate-Party as I was tracing Slim Amamou, a cyber activist and a co-founder of the group. Slim was arrested and tortured under Ben

⁸ I-Watch Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/I.WATCH.Organization/>

⁹ Manich-Msamah Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/manichmsame7/>

¹⁰ Pirate-Party Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Pirate.Party.TN/>

Ali regime, and after the revolution he was elected as Secretary for Sport and Youth Ministry, but he resigned shortly and focused his activism on the Pirate-Party. The party advocates for direct democracy and individual freedom (such as legalization of the use of Cannabis), but their agenda is perceived controversially among the older generation and conservative groups. This case provides a unique insight on contemporary activism that is located in traditional political arenas.¹¹

This information I captured through a desk research from a distance, but when I went for fieldwork the three groups intersected at various points. During my fieldwork the reconciliation law was discussed at the Parliament for the third round, and since the three cases are concerned with corruption in governmental institutions they were collaborating closely among them. In the next chapter, the reader will notice how the shared mission of three groups along with the timing of my fieldwork influenced the research context and generated uneven findings about each of the cases.

¹¹ Tunisian Pirate Party is another Pirate political party headed by Slaheddin Kshok, yet the one founded by Slim Amamou is the officially recognized party by the global Pirate Party movement. Their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/partipirate/>

4. Stories From Tunis

My fieldwork took place between mid-July and mid-August, during that period I-Watch was preparing for monitoring municipality elections, Pirate-Party was working on their elections campaign *Ija Trachab* (Come and Run), and both groups joined Manich-Msamah mobilizations and protests against the reconciliation law. Despite of the short duration of my fieldwork, the timing enabled me to capture a series of incidences that evolved to connected stories and illuminated my research inquiries.

I arrived to Tunis on the 12th of July in a typical extremely hot Mediterranean summer. The streets were filled with advertisements regarding municipality elections and summer music festivals. On the same day, I-Watch posted a Facebook invitation for a press conference about their investigative journalism work, which was scheduled on the next morning. I was not expecting to start fieldwork this early but I decided to seize the opportunity and attend the conference.

4.1. Between hotel conferences and street protests

I-Watch organized the conference at Hotel Africa; they often conduct their events at this hotel because of its central location and accessibility¹². The conference arrangements were very humble; a panel table with a banner behind it and few chairs lined up in front of the panel. One of I-Watch staff used a smartphone to live-stream the conference on Facebook, the NGO is profoundly dependent on media to disseminate their work. During the conference, Manel Ben Achour (I-Watch Acting Executive Director) said “Media is the strongest weapon to engage citizens in the fight against corruption”. After I-Watch staff presented their work on investigative journalism, they opened the floor for questions. A retired police officer started the conversation by mocking the name of the organization, and then he questioned their fund resources and recommended them to seek elders’ advice because “they know better”. His statement summarized the challenges this youth-led organization has to face: fighting corruption at a young age is perceived suspicious especially from the older generation, beside the constant attack on them because of receiving international funds though they regularly updated their donors list and published detailed financial reports on their website.

In the following week I attended another two events I found on Facebook; one was organized by the Democratic Transition and Human Rights Support organization at Majestic Hotel, and the other was organized by NDI at Hotel Africa. Both organizers hired professional photographers, served coffee breaks,

¹² Interview with Intisar Arfaoui

and even NDI provided interpretation services and distributed promotional materials. Comparing this to I-Watch conference demonstrates how the NGO differs from other civil society organizations. According to I-Watch website, they do receive significant amount of money but the humble hotel-based arrangements reflect their strong agency in deciding on their spending priorities.

Asma Sabri represented I-Watch at the NDI conference; I met her last year through I-Watch network and since then we kept in contact. When Asma and I left the hotel, she offered to connect me with Manich-Msamah as she is also a member of the movement. I already had a few names in mind: Layla Riahi, Charfiddin Elkelil (known as Charfi) and Khalil Lahbib. Asma managed to connect me with them immediately through a phone call and a couple of Facebook messages.

I saw Layla in a YouTube recorded interview¹³ representing Manich-Msamah in a talk show at Atessia TV (Tunisian local TV) along with other politicians. Layla was the only female in an all men panel discussion; she was confident, fearless and she refused to be silenced by them. Layla suggested meeting on 19th July at the Al-Hana Hotel at the downtown, it was my first time at that place, the hotel lobby looked like a portrait from early 1990s with scattered pale-brown couches and old tables. She showed up wearing a grey T-shirt with Manich-Msamah logo on it, I was curious if the police would harass her for wearing the T-shirt, she answered "I walk around freely wearing the T-shirt. If the police stop me, what will happen? They had beaten us before". After an insightful interview with Layla, she indicated that Manich-Msamah will continue with their demonstrations until the reconciliation law is canceled¹⁴. In the evening Manich-Msamah posted an event¹⁵ on Facebook inviting people to protest in front of the Parliament the next morning parallel to the Parliament discussion on the reconciliation law.

On 20th July morning, there were several protesting groups in front of the Parliament but Manich-Msamah activists stood out with their campaign T-shirts. The group members looked very young, and interestingly most of the females were wearing red lipstick that matches the logo colour printed on their T-shirts. Protesters chanted different slogans but the only slogan that united them was the national anthem. Khalil shouted through the loudspeaker "I will not forgive, it will not pass!" and other members repeated after him. When the media left the Parliament Khalil lit a red flame, which portrayed a vibrant visual scene along with Manich-Msamah coordinated T-shirts, flags, and hipster-designed posters. Unlike other protesters, Manich-Msamah offered visually appealing material that guaranteed their place in the main news headlines.

¹³ The episode link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPgQKXEVP3g>

¹⁴ Interview with Layla Riahi

¹⁵ 20th July protest Facebook event:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/1184799148292885/>



Figure 02: 20th July Manich- Msamah protest- Photo source: The researcher

Before we left the group lined up in front of the wall across the Parliament, I thought they were seeking some shade but smoothly they took a few steps forward while Khalil remained standing by the wall, he opened one of the girls bag, took a black spray and wrote on the wall Manich-Msamah and then people moved away quietly without looking back. The group seemed well coordinated in their action, I do not know if this was planned or not but they did it gracefully.

While we were waiting for a taxi to leave, Khalil made a joke “there are two things hard to find in Tunisia: a Taxi and a job”, that made me realize that most people who protested were either students in their summer break or unemployed. We headed to LiberThé café where activists often hang out, we were welcomed by the smell of cigarettes, tables and chairs were made of recycled pallets and there was a library corner full of coded books. Khalil and I joined the rest of the group who arrived before us. I was curious to know what drives them to protest and that is how we initiated our conversation, Hamza Abidi commented “We cannot give up on our revolution gains”, while Nada Trigui said “The danger of tomorrow is bigger than the danger of today that is why we are protesting ‘today’ ”. Their responses revealed the feeling of ownership of 2011 revolution and the responsibility of protecting their gains.

On 21 July Manich-Msamah organized another protest¹⁶ in front of Tunis Municipality Theater. Around 200 people attended under the name of Manich-Msamah. Protesters chanted “no fear, no horror, the street belongs to the people”. They held posters and flags they used the day before. I noticed that the

¹⁶ 21st July protest Facebook event:
<https://www.facebook.com/events/1948961831991956/>

T-shirts had a male and a female version of the text (Manich-Msamah and Manich-Msamaha)¹⁷, which implies the strong feminist presence in the movement. Protesters were singing their slogans and dancing on the drumbeats, they were simply having fun and that was enough to attract a walker attention to stop and ask or join the protest. Suddenly in the middle of the crowd one of Manich-Msamah members grabbed another guy vigorously and dragged him away from the crowd. When we went for coffee after the protest Khalil explained that they assign members responsible for protesters' safety and the guy was caught harassing a female during the protest.



Figure 03: 21th July Manich- Msamah protest- Photo source: The researcher

In my first week in Tunis, I managed to attend and observe a number of events and protests that demonstrated the autonomous agency of youth activist groups, and the creativity of their actions that granted them a broader support. Throughout this week the government remained quiet, but that did not last for long.

4.2. The power of a T-shirt

25th July is the Day of the Republic in Tunisia; in celebration of the day the Presidential Police Members Association and the Ministry of Interior organized a famous Tunisian Sufi performance called Al-Zyara at Carthage Theatre. Summer music festivals were taking place in various governorates in Tunisia but these performances cannot be isolated from politics, a French-Tunisian comedian called Michel Boujenah faced an outrageous boycott movement because of his support to Israel (Richard 2017). Many activist groups including

¹⁷ Arabic is a gendered language but in communication the male version is usually used to address both male and female

the Pirate-Party supported the boycott movement, which led the Israeli Pirate-Party to hack their electronic accounts¹⁸. In Mahdia¹⁹, the police refused to secure Klay BBJ (a Tunisian rapper) performance because his songs insulted them (Ghanmi 2017). As Tunisian activists are using art for political expression, the police are also using art to reinforce their power; they are organizing Al-Zyara performance on the republic day and simultaneously they refused to secure other art performances that criticize them.

During Al-Zyara performance a number of I-Watch and Manich-Msamah members were arrested because of wearing the campaign T-shirts! They were forced to take off the T-shirts in order to get in the theater, and that threatened their freedom of expression as citizens. One of the youth activists had the campaign flag in her bag, and during the performance she took a photo of the flag with the stage in the background, then posted the photo on Manich-Msamah Facebook page along with this caption (translated from Arabic) “Despite their pathetic attempts to stop the campaign youth from entering, the campaign logo was there”. Why would a T-shirt scare them?

The Manich-Msamah T-shirt became a symbol for the movement. The initial idea behind the T-shirt was to promote for the campaign and open a channel for public donations to support the movement, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) donated the first batch of the T-shirts but more people wanted to buy them so Manich-Msamah started printing and selling them for a minimum price²⁰. However, that was not always in their favor, in Attesia TV interview with Layla, a politician accused them of receiving fund from political parties to print the T-shirts. Manich-Msamah was already mobilizing for a protest²¹ in front of the Parliament on 28th July parallel to the final discussion on the reconciliation law, but after the T-shirt ban they used the incidence to scale up their mobilization and they announced on Facebook to start the protest on 27th July evening and sleep in front of the Parliament.

On 26th July I attended a meeting for the Pirate-Party, they organize weekly public meetings every Wednesday at 19:00. We gathered at a local café in Lafayette, one of the things you cannot but notice in Tunis is the massive spread of local cafés that are crowded all day long, you will find them around almost every corner with old plastic chairs occupied mostly by men who are sipping their cold coffee! Ali a young Pirate-Party member came wearing a Manich-Msamah T-shirt, it turned out he was not part of the movement but he wanted to show solidarity after the T-shirt ban incidence. Eight people attended the meeting but they were not all members, and Yosra the president of Pirate-Party was the

¹⁸ Interview with Yosra Khadhraoui

¹⁹ A governorate in central-eastern Tunisia

²⁰ Interview with Myriam Bribri

²¹ 28th July protest Facebook event:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/297189794079210/>

only female in that meeting. Slim (founder of the party) did not dominate the discussion, he was carefully listening to people's ideas, and he would discretely interfere to facilitate the meeting. The group discussed the Pirate-Party support to Manich-Msamah and left with action points to be completed before the protest on the next day, but that plan did not happen. This was the main challenge Pirate-Party faces, they have a prominent vision but they are a small party with few members who cannot easily turn their vision into action.

We left the meeting at 23:00 but of course there was another round of coffee before going home. Along with the Pirate-Party members, Mouafek (from I-Watch) and Khalil (from Manich-Msamah) joined us with another two friends in a local café. At that time, I was with people from the three activist groups drinking coffee and discussing the reconciliation law. The connectedness of the three youth activist groups manifested clearly at that point, influenced by the personal relations that are growing among them, the reconciliation law, and perhaps coffee. Local cafés are indeed the accessible and affordable space for young people to network, exchange ideas, and mobilize.

I-Watch and the Pirate-Party supported Manich-Msamah in mobilizing for the protest on 27th July; male and female activists planned to sleep in front of the Parliament demanding to abolish the reconciliation law. The T-shirt ban had a wide echo. Manich-Msamah called for protests in ten governorates across Tunisia. The three activist groups posted on their Facebook pages photos of Samia Abbou (a female parliamentarian) wearing the T-shirt at the Parliament; this was a direct message to reinforce freedom of expression inside the Parliament and equally Carthage Theater or broadly at the civic space. The comments on their Facebook events diverged between supporters and opponents; nevertheless the page admin was responsive and engaged with both sides. I-Watch posts had a similar content but the majority of comments were aggressive. I-Watch admin did not respond to these comments and did not delete them as well because the organization believe it is an open space for people to express their views²². I-Watch posted a 1min30sec video²³ created by Aly Mhenni, the video starts with a guy wearing a T-shirt and a cap with the word OBEY typed on them, while he was reading news about the reconciliation law he gets up and changes his OBEY T-shirt to Manich-Msamah T-shirt, and carries a big drum with a closing message encouraging people to join the protest. This was an innovative invitation to mobilize for the protest, which employed the T-shirt ban in a short and eye-catching video that instantly went viral. The Pirate-Party is barely active on Facebook, so even when they posted the same content the engagement remained low. The immediacy and innovative use of

²² Interview with Chérif El Khadi

²³ The link to the video:

<https://www.facebook.com/I.WATCH.Organization/videos/1406533396067885/>

Facebook by I-Watch and Manich-Msamah explains their exponential outreach to youth in comparison to the Pirate-Party.

The T-shirt ban story indicates the increasing government pressure on the civic space, however youth activists employed this incidence into various creative acts to mobilize for their cause.

4.3. 27th & 28th July protests

On 27th July LiberThé was a busy working station for activists who were preparing for the protest. Khalil and Montassar were busy preparing new posters and stencils. Most of the people who walked into LiberThé that day were wearing the campaign T-shirts. Would the government be able to ban the t-shirt in local cafés as they did in Carthage? At 18:00 activists gathered in front of I-Watch office, which is right across LiberThé. Aly Mehenni came from Monastir²⁴ to Tunis to join the protest, but he also had news to share! The assembly decided to delay the discussion until they return from the parliament break. Everyone was mesmerized by the news but they decided to proceed with the protests because they were afraid that they are being fooled. Obviously youth activists had no trust in the government, and they were also confident in the power of their street mobilization.

In front of the Parliament the police stopped Aly and Khalil to search their bags, and found the graffiti spray with Khalil, but both of them argued with the police officers and got the spray back because simply there is no law that prohibits them from carrying a graffiti spray. The activists were aware of their rights as citizens and this strengthened their position in front of the police. Moreover, the support of lawyer members of their groups assures them that they are legally protected. Activists might lose trust in the government but not in their legal rights as citizens.

At the protest youth were singing and having fun! This time they shouted a new slogan mocking the T-shirt ban saying “The monster is coming and it is wearing a Manich-Msamah T-shirt”. Policemen were standing across the street and watching the protesters. A girl started to mobilize to distract the police while they put up the tent, but the policemen noticed and interfered. Both grabbed the tent’s metal skeleton and pulled it in opposite directions! It was dark, I could not see what was happening but the protesters were moving as a one large mass. Both sides kept grabbing the skeleton back and forth until it was broken, after that the policemen returned to their place and no one was arrested. At midnight I took a taxi leaving many youth activists behind. The situation was overwhelming and unpredictable! How would they spend their night in the street in front of the police? The taxi passed by several local cafés filled with people playing cards and chatting, do those people know what is

²⁴ A governorate in north-eastern Tunisia

happening a few meters away from them in front of the Parliament? When I reached home, I continued following them on the Facebook live-streaming. Khalil told me that 60-70 activists slept there, and they spent the night singing together until the neighbours came and complained because of the noise.



Figure 04: The T-shirt banner with Manich-Msamah logo- Photo source: Manich-Msamah Facebook page

In the next day morning, the activists who slept in front of the Parliament were already lining up chanting their slogans. They had a new banner in the shape of a giant T-shirt with Manich-Msamah logo on it. Again, they found new means to use the T-shirt ban in their favour. Khalil was walking around with Manich-Msamah stencils and spraying the wall in front of the parliament. I was worried that the police will arrest him; but he was confident they would not act in such situation. One of the parliament members came and announced officially that the decision was postponed until the end of the Parliament break.

After the protest I managed to meet Charfi as he came from Mahdia²⁵ to Tunis for the public session. He is one of the core team members who started Manich-Msamah, he is also a lawyer who volunteered to defend many activists in court. We walked to a café nearby the Parliament and we had an insightful discussion about the civic space in Tunisia before and after 2011. According to Cherfi, the risk they are facing currently is nothing compared to the situation before 2011. He commented on the public session delay saying “the government is wicked therefore it is important to mobilize people in the streets and continue preparing for the upcoming battles”²⁶.

Despite the lack of trust between youth activists and the government, protesters trusted in their freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. They fearlessly stood up in the face of the police and continued to wear the T-Shirts and used the ban incidence innovatively in their mobilization. Though the government response did not escalate, the delay decision can be interpreted as a tool to put youth activism on hold. Would the government succeed in this?

²⁵ A governorate in central-eastern Tunisia

²⁶ Interview with Charfiddin Elkelil

4.4. Too many stories, too little time

Before arriving to Tunisia I was concerned that I have only few weeks to collect sufficient data for the research, but it turned out that the timing of my fieldwork was rich of events and street protests. The challenge I faced that most of the data I collected was about Manich-Msamah, because it was the rising issue at that moment. As the movement activities faded during the Parliament summer break, I used that time to focus on I-Watch and the Pirate-Party.

In the first week of August I worked from I-Watch office. On my way to the organization, I heard over the radio that the police refused to secure a number of music festivals especially for Tunisian rappers. The police are escalating the situation, and I wonder what will happen when the Parliament discuss the law for deterring attacks on security personnel. I-Watch office is located in Lafayette, they are occupying two floors in a building, the first floor is an open co-working space with a number of meeting rooms and the second floor is for staff offices. The organization recently installed a security door and a surveillance camera after the threats they received from Karoui-and-Karoui²⁷, but behind the security door the place looked very vibrant with colourful beanbags scattered around, and the walls were decorated with drawings and motivational quotes. The youthful spirit of the organization was clearly reflected in their workspace.

Once I was sitting with Mouafek and Khalil at LiberThé café complaining about the hot weather, and Khalil teased Mouafek saying that Manich-Msamah is fighting corruption in the streets while I-Watch is fighting corruption under air-conditioners. Mouafek responded “Look at me! I am moving from a governorate to another to follow up on I-Watch projects. You should have joined us to Jendouba²⁸ in the summer and then criticize us”. The joke Khalil made comes from the stigma I-Watch has as an NGO. Nevertheless the organization is expanding their work beyond the capital, and they launched branches in three governorates in collaboration with local organizations²⁹. I-Watch and Manich-Msamah are both active outside the capital, while Pirate-Party have very few members in other governorates because they are few in number and most of their communications happen virtually through their online platform “The Pirates Island”³⁰.

On 15th August night, a post went viral on Facebook; Hamza Abidi from Manich-Msamah was missing. The next day, Manich-Msamah members searched for him in hospitals and police stations and they were in contact with Hamza’s family. In the afternoon, Hamza appeared online and posted a status that he

²⁷ I-Watch investigated and filed legal corruption cases against business elites Karoui-and-Karoui. The link to the report: <https://www.iwatch.tn/ar/article/61>

²⁸ A governorate in north-western Tunisia

²⁹ Interview with Asma Sabri

³⁰ Interview with Amin Cherif

was arrested and beaten, and he was not allowed to call his family or a lawyer. I could not find out why he was arrested but an activist life can be in danger at any moment, and even if they feel protected by their citizenship rights the authorities are still able to neglect these rights.

On the same day I went to attend Pirate-Party weekly meeting, and I interviewed Slim and Amin from the party hoping to conclude my fieldwork with their interviews. Around 22:00 I received a Facebook message from Achref of a photo without a text; it had a hidden connotation referring to the current head of government Youssef Chahed and corruption. Few minutes later Facebook was flooded with this photo, but all the posts were made from individual profiles and not from I-Watch Facebook page to avoid any legal consequences³¹. I expected things to be more quite during the Parliament break but obviously youth activist are operating 24/7. This reminded me of a statement Slim said in his interview “everyday you have like hundred issues to keep you busy, the government make troubles and we have to act. How can we keep up?³²”

The beauty of working with people in the field is that you can observe and sometime be part of their inspiring stories, but those stories do not have a closure. Youth activists stories kept evolving after I left Tunisia; more activists were arrested for wearing Manich-Msamah T-shirt, the police became violent during the street protests, and sadly the government announced an exceptional Parliamentary session and passed the reconciliation law. Due to the complexity of the situation, I focused the analysis on the data I collected from the field between July and August.

³¹ Interview with Chérif El Khadi

³² Interview with Slim Amamou

5. Through the CDC Lenses

5.1. Civic space in Tunisia

The concept of civic space was often confused with the civil society and public space, because in Arabic both ‘civic’ and ‘civil’ have the exact meaning (*madani*), additionally the notion of space led to the confusion with the public space. The civic space includes any space for citizens association, peaceful assembly and expression (CIVICUS 2017). In this paper I am looking at activism practiced under diverse statuses: civil society, a social movement and a political party, but those spaces interweave with other spaces such as the digital space, streets and cafés. Consequently, there are no rigid borders that frame civic space; it is the broader space that acknowledges the power of citizens multiple identities to generate socio-political change whether practiced through civil or uncivil actions.

Fluid boundaries and multiple identities

The fieldwork revealed the blurred status of the three activist groups I selected. I-Watch was often differentiated from other NGOs, and that increased the organization credibility among the activists. Nevertheless, the stigma of NGOs and donor agenda persists, that was noticeable through people comments on the organization Facebook posts and the retired policeman comment during I-Watch press conference. On the other hand, Manich-Msamah members rejected to be classified under civil society umbrella, according to Layla “the civil society is consistent and easily manipulated! We do not need a space for consistency we need a space for resistance”³³. While for the Pirate-Party, several activists considered it closer to a CSO rather than a political party, but Amin explained “We are against the traditional idea of political parties, our party aims to create a space for every citizen to participate in politics directly”³⁴. The Pirate-Party wants to change the political system from representative democracy to direct democracy, but in order to do so they are using the traditional political arena as a temporary access point. Overall, the cases challenge the traditional model of society and focus the discussion on the broader civic space instead of a limited sector. Therefore, the conceptualization of civic space helps accommodate the fluidity of activist groups along with their changing multiple statuses.

As I mentioned earlier, it was challenging to associate the activists I interviewed with only one of the groups. Looking at the timeline demonstrated in the graph below, the three activist groups emerged at different years and some

³³ Interview with Layla Ryahi, a member of Manich-Msamah

³⁴ Interview with Amin Cherif, a member of Pirate-Party

of them expanded faster than the others, yet the three groups trajectories coincide in 2015 along with the proposal of the reconciliation law. As the three groups are concerned with fighting corruption in the state institutions, they mobilized against the reconciliation law and supported each other actions. Nevertheless, this collaboration was not limited to the three analysed cases, other individuals and groups such as Al-Bawsala and FTDES supported the cause. Beyond the reconciliation law, youth activists are also members of other NGOs, or staff in the private sector, or even working for the government. For instance, Achref Aoudi is I-Watch founder, a full-time staff in a private corporation who provides services for governmental institutions, Manich-Msamah supporter, a fan of rap and a football maniac -Chelsea precisely. Therefore, Achref has multiple identities and operates at different sectors. This brings us back to the debates of the floating boundaries in the society model suggested by Biekart and Fowler (2012: 182) and Edwards (2009:24), which reinforces that activists are actually exercising their citizenship 24/7 at various locations of the civic space.

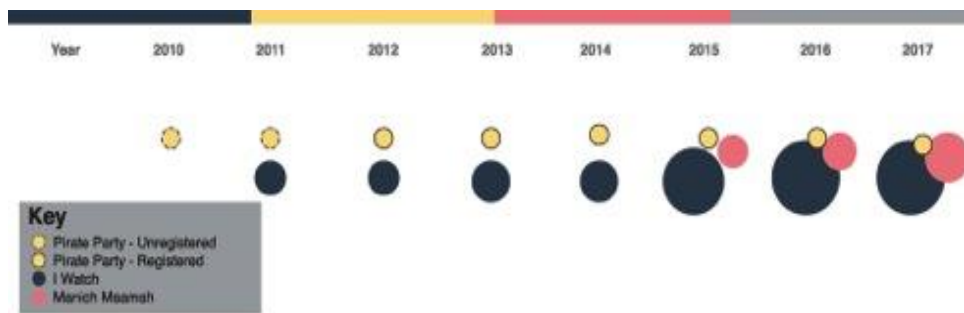


Figure 05: A timeline of the three youth activist groups

This pluralism of identities does not only magnify citizen's power, it also generalizes the stigma and risk associated with each of these identities, such as their affiliation to a political party or foreign agendas. According to Mouafek "The risk is now that you are not alone, you become worried about your friends and colleagues"³⁵. Hence, the politics of belonging manifest at two levels: (a) within a smaller circle of youth activists who were collaborating together in fighting corruption, and (b) within a the wider circle of citizens of Tunisia who were all affected by the consequences of corruption, this might explain how the national anthem brought unity among the different activists groups who protested in front of the parliament on 20th July.

Civil vs. uncivil

The debate of civil and uncivil is very controversial, because it varies from individuals to groups and it is often confused with what is ethical or legal. In one of the meetings I attended for the Pirate-Party, they were planning an action to

³⁵ Interview with Mouafek Zouari

support Manich-Msamah and they had a serious debate on deciding if their intervention is ethical or not. While I-Watch always maintained the legality of their actions, Manel emphasized “I-Watch ensures to follow the law, we do not organize activities without getting a legal permission”³⁶. But Charfi had a different opinion saying “The law guarantees the right of assembly so why should activists get a permission to practice their right”³⁷. Looking back at I-Watch social media campaigns, they attacked political figures using inappropriate words but for this they were using their individual accounts. This clearly distinguishes activist individual agency from the collective agency in determining their actions, it also implies that they are aware of the consequences of their actions and are ready to handle it individually in order to protect their groups. Aly said “I am not supporting uncivil approaches but sometimes you have to respond”³⁸. Khalil had a similar response, as he explained that the situation determines the civility or incivility of his actions³⁹. This leads to an unpredictable situation regarding the tendency of youth activists to act/react uncivilly. Nonetheless, a CDC framework acknowledges all actions (civil and uncivil) capacity to generate change.

5.2. The youthfulness narrative

Youthfulness of shared identities

The three youth activist groups used innovative actions that are expressive, fun and attractive for youth and media. The youthfulness of their actions led to strengthening the politics of belonging among youth through creating a shared identity. According to Bayat (2010: 119) “the young recognize shared identity by noticing collective symbols inscribed for instance: in style, type of activities, and places”. In terms of style, Montassar confirmed this by saying “When I see Achref on TV in his T-shirt and Converse shoes I feel that this guy represents me in a time we do not trust politicians in suits and ties. When I hear Klay BBJ dedicating his song to Manich-Msamah I feel part of a bigger movement”⁴⁰, this reflects how symbolic actions such as an outfit or a rap song are capable of connecting youth activists together. While in terms of activity, the use of specially designed T-shirts, drumming, stencils, graffiti, flames, short videos, and the extensive use of Facebook, are all examples of techniques that captured youth attention and allowed them to enjoy the experience of being part of the cohort. Moreover, the horizontal leadership approach played a strategic role in engaging more youth, because it facilitated the engagement of youth in several governorates not only in the capital, and that gave youth the opportunity to

³⁶ Interview with Manel Ben Achour

³⁷ Interview with Charfiddin Elkelil

³⁸ Interview with Aly Mehenni

³⁹ Interview with Khalil Lahbib

⁴⁰ Interview with Montassar Ben Jdila

occupy essential leadership roles. Additionally, Places contributed to the formation of shared identity among youth, for example LiberThé café served as a hub for youth activists to meet, connect to the Internet and spend their free time at the cost of 1-2euros. Such places foster discussions that contribute to raising consciousness among youth and build their collective identity. The question here is, how would the youthfulness of shared identities trigger change? From Bourdieu's perspective, these actions are shared habitus that construct the youth generation. Edmunds & Turner (2002: 16) explained "Where a generation manages to develop a strong sense of its own culture through a shared habitus it has a greater ability to mobilize its members around political issues or social causes". Therefore, Manich-Msamah T-shirt is not only a cool trend; it is a mean of mobilization and expression, and when the government tried to ban it, more youth (even who are not part of the movement such as Ali from Pirate-Party) started to wear it not only in protests but also in everyday life in attempts to reclaim their freedom of expression in the civic space.

In this research there is an evident generational narrative between the old generation and the young generation. In an interview with Zyna she said "We allowed the elders to decide for us for so long and we saw the results, now we are claiming our own space and fight in our own way"⁴¹. Zyna and many other youth blamed the older generation for the oppression by Ben Ali regime because they did not resist. On the other hand, opponents from the older generation undermined youth activists and their contribution to politics, for instance Soufien Toubal, a politician at Nidaa Tounes Party, called youth activists '*froukh*', which means little chicks, because for him youth are just ranting and will not be able to change anything. Ironically youth activists themselves started to use this word while praising their achievements over social media to proof what the '*froukh*' are capable of!⁴²

Youth activist groups showed that they are learning from this tension with the older generation, and that reflected in their strategic approach in engaging the younger generation. According to Achref:

"Young means you can do a lot of stuff; you can take risks, you can be hard core, but you will not be young forever. People will start having other commitments and then you know that the team will be less daring in a couple of years. It comes with age! This is when you need to keep the older generation to share their experience and look for a younger generation who is ready to fight"⁴³.

The mutual experience of living under an authoritarian regime established the collective identity among youth activists, and then their shared grievance and

⁴¹ Interview with Zyna Mejri

⁴² Interview with Montassar Ben Jdila

⁴³ Interview with Achref Aoudi

hope for a better future fuelled their energy that led the revolution, adding another layer to this collective identity. This resonates with Mannheim generational theory on how past, present and future experiences construct a generation. Youth activist groups decided to play the role of watchdogs to pressure the government because they feel the ownership of the revolution and the responsibility to protect the revolution gains. However the energy that drives youth actions is not consistent, according to Charfi “Activism is energy and energy varies from one person to the other, some choose to continue the fight and others choose to quit and that is normal, but what is not acceptable is to sell yourself to the authorities”⁴⁴. It is important to highlight here that the research does not assume that all youth in Tunisia are activists, but it focuses on youth who chose to resist.

Being a female activist

Tunisia is one of the most progressive countries in the Arab region in the field of women rights. Coming from a Jordanian-Palestinian background, I noticed that minor acts such as taking a taxi ride late at night or setting in local cafés that are dominated by men seemed normal for females in Tunis, while the same acts are often considered unsafe or inappropriate back home. Female activists in Tunisia acknowledged this privilege but at the same time they are still facing challenges with the social expectations⁴⁵. Henda explained “People do not like a girl with strong personality who is engaged in politics. My mother hates it when I return home late or join protests, she says: ‘who will marry you?’”⁴⁶.

Yet this social pressure did not prevent female activists from working with men side by side. During the protests female activists were always present, a number of them also slept in front of the parliament on the night of the 27th July. Female activists praised their gender identity in their activism; Manich-Msamah printed the campaign T-shirts with a female Arabic version of the slogan, and many female activists wore them along with bright red lipstick during the protests, Myriam commented “I always encourage girls to put on make up during the protests, I do not have to look masculine to be an activist”⁴⁷. Female activists occupied central positions in the three groups, for example the Pirate-Party is headed by Yosra Khadhraoui who is a 22 years old female. Likewise, I-Watch key positions were occupied by females but the president’s position is always occupied by a male, because the president has to handle the legal charges against the organization and I-Watch do not want the female col-

⁴⁴ Interview with Charfiddin Elkelil

⁴⁵ Interview with Zyna Mejri

⁴⁶ Interview with Henda Fellah

⁴⁷ Interview with Myriam Bribri

leagues to go through this hassle⁴⁸. Perhaps this implies a patriarchal stance, but for I-Watch members it was the way they take care of each other. It is interesting on this point to observe the relation between male and female activists, as they feel responsible for the safety of each other, and that applies both ways, for example when Hamza went missing, female activists took the lead in searching for him at hospitals and police departments.

During my fieldwork, Tunisians celebrated two decisions that leverage the status of women rights. The first was on 26th July when the parliament approved the law of eliminating violence against women⁴⁹, and the second was on 13th August when Essebsi announced amendments of certain laws that allows Tunisian Muslim females to marry non-Muslims and enforced equality in heritage laws⁵⁰. The second announcement divided public opinion between supporters who celebrated this as a remarkable support for women rights in Tunisia, while others saw it as a contradiction with the laws of Islamic religion. In the midst of this, there is a strong link between these pro-feminist laws and the upcoming elections. Bourgiba and Ben Ali previously used women rights as a political tool (Burgess et al. 2013: 397, Debuysere 2015: 234), and now Essebsi is following their steps to gain more popularity specially while competing with Islamist political party in the upcoming elections.

5.3. Connectedness

Local connectedness

Each of the cases showed a different approach to expand their work outside Tunis. I-Watch has volunteers and members across the country, they also launched offices in three governorates through the ‘I Assist program’ that works with local youth groups and organizations driven by the local knowledge and needs. Manich-Msamah demonstrated a wide presence across governorates due to their horizontal leadership working-model, which simply allows locals to plan their own protests under the name of the movement as long as they are committed to its general principles. On 27th and 28th July Manich-Msamah protests took place in nine governorates in addition to the capital, however the photos they posted on Facebook from these protests shows that they were smaller in size and less innovative compared to the ones in Tunis, which indicates how local experiences and limited resources are shaping local actions. This highlights the overlap between the ‘politics of scale’ and the ‘politics of knowledge’, as the activist groups are reaching out to youth in other gover-

⁴⁸ Interview with Achref Aoudi

⁴⁹ The link of the news: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/27/tunisia-landmark-step-shield-women-violence>

⁵⁰ The link to the news: https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170814-tunisian-president-calls-for-full-gender-equality/#.WZMa7n_URd8

norates but they are not imposing their knowledge, instead they are playing a facilitation role while the locals are taking the lead.

A number of activists left the capital and have moved back to their home governorates such as Aly, Meriem, and Charfi. Partly because they want to work with youth in their local governorates but this is also affected by their employment situation. People who are working outside the capital are either self-employed, working in private businesses, or unemployed. The geographical distance and the limited financial recourses are the main challenges for scalability, yet youth activist groups were able to overcome these challenges through: securing alternative local and international funds, and the extensive use of digital media.

Global connectedness

The relationship with international actors is often associated with money but it also has an important aspect of knowledge production. The Pirate-Party and Manich-Msamah did not receive any foreign funds; instead they created their own means of funding. The Pirate-Party organized low budget activities using their individual resources, while Manich-Msamah sold the campaign T-shirts and organized a Bazar to sell hand-made products and secure their financial resources. Among the three cases, I-Watch is the only group that receives funds from international actors, but Manel clarified “We selectively choose our donors; there were times when we did not have money but refused to collaborate with certain donors because they might interfere in our work”⁵¹. I-Watch agency plays out evidently not only in the selection of donors but also in their financial expenditures, which was reflected in their humble spending during the press conference compared to other NGOs. This does not necessary mean that civic agency is always civil, Zyna explained “There are NGOs which receive international funds and spend it on supporting terrorism, but there are also NGOs who are working and they are making a difference”⁵². Additionally, I-Watch created I-Watch5, a bank account of staff and member donations for the organization to fund their independent activities.

“We use I-Watch5 to create problems! For example, we were working on the National Integrity System (NIS) program that was funded by the EU, and in that period the reconciliation law was recently proposed so we decided to organize a debate discussing the pros and cons of this law as part of the NIS program. The Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs was visiting the EU at that time and he claimed that the EU is interfering with the country’s internal issues by supporting this debate. As a result of this, our EU contact person asked us to cancel the debate; instead we removed the EU logo and

⁵¹ Interview with Manel Ben Achour

⁵² Interview with Zyna Mejri

conducted the debate using I Watch5 money. No donor can tell us what we should do; we decide what we want to do”⁵³.

The formation of I-Watch5 reflects that the organization is aware of foreign funding challenges, and it is trying to anticipate these challenges through creating alternative sources of income.

The relationship with international agencies is not solely money-related. The three groups are connecting with international actors in order to exchange learning experiences. The Pirate-Party is initially a part of the Pirate-Party movement worldwide, and therefore they share general work structures and guidelines. While Manich-Msamah connected with the Lebanese social movement *Tul’it Ribetkum* (You Stink)⁵⁴ to learn from their experience. Interestingly, the politics of knowledge here is not limited to Western experiences. In addition to the previous examples I-Watch adopted the “Morsi Meter” campaign in Egypt and launched several ‘Meter’ campaigns to monitor the country presidents and prime ministers (Martin 2015: 798-9).

Tunisian activists demonstrated a high self-consciousness in their engagement with the international community, they have been selective in their partnerships, and they were “borrowing” knowledge and experiences that help them reach their goals (Martin 2015: 798). This created a hybrid knowledge that is adopted and adapted from both global and local experiences, Hamza reinforced this saying “We are following international movements and adopting new approaches that captures the eyes of the local youth and the media”⁵⁵. These choices reflect the autonomous civic agency of Tunisian activists that is driven by their own vision of a ‘just’ society.

Digital connectedness

Digital media was the catalyst of the Tunisian revolution back in 2011. Youth activists continued to use social media for communication, mobilization and knowledge sharing. The Pirate-Party has their own digital platform “The Pirates Island”⁵⁶ that connects members across the country, however youth engagement remains very low on their Facebook page. While I-Watch and Manich-Msamah are mainly using their Facebook pages to share information and educate other citizens about their work, announcing events and protests, and sharing news about their work progress and struggles. They also use digital platforms for group coordination such as Google groups and closed Facebook groups. There is no doubt that Facebook facilitated the engagement of youth inside and outside the capital. Facebook live-streaming helped expand the outreach of the youth activist groups. All the events and protests I attended were

⁵³ Interview with Intisar Arfawi

⁵⁴ A social movement responding to the garbage crises in Lebanon

⁵⁵ Interview with Hamza Abidi

⁵⁶ Interview with Yosra Khadhraoui

live-streamed on Facebook. The instant virtual experience strengthened the notion of belonging to what activists are doing on the ground, that might also contribute to bridging the gap between online and offline activism as more virtual audience feels engaged and motivated to join the protests.

Additionally, digital media supported the immediacy and innovation of actions and enabled the expansion of the youth activist groups. Reflecting on the T-shirt ban incidence, youth activists immediately posted the photo of the campaign flag inside the theatre, which was followed by a social media campaign that went viral not only through written statements, but also through visual content such as the video Aly created. They also employed the T-shirt ban incidence in various creative actions such as the giant T-shirt banner. All these elements demonstrate how the youthfulness of actions helped to scale up the youth activists outreach.

The online content was tailored to target Tunisian youth, therefore the activist groups used creative means to display the content: they mainly used Tunisian Arabic (*derja*) and classical Arabic in their communication. The choice of language makes them closer to people and inclusive to all Tunisian citizens specially youth in rural areas who do not speak French or English. There is a noticeable focus on producing visual content such as info-graphs and short videos instead of long texts. Chérif was enthusiastic about this approach as he said “One-minute video is the new hit. Lets take the example of AJ+, people do not like Al-Jazeera but they watch their videos. I-Watch has excellent journalist investigations which exceed 6000 words but who will read that? Therefore we are working on visualizing this content in the form of short videos and info-graphs”⁵⁷.

Digital platforms facilitated activist groups’ outreach to youth nationwide, interaction with international actors, and production of youthful local content. In a globalized world it is not difficult to be virtually connected, but this also has shortcomings. Youth activists are facing online attacks, and to some extent digital media might make them lazy and limit their activism to the form of clicktivism, therefore it is important to keep this complementary interplay between online and offline activism.

5.4. The citizenship discourse

Youth activists showed a high awareness of their rights as citizens; they are actually using the citizenship discourse to protect themselves and to legitimize their actions and demands. According to Charfi “Citizenship protects political activists if they are aware of their rights”⁵⁸. When policemen stopped Aly and Khalil and searched their bags both showed confidence and knowledge about

⁵⁷ Interview with Chérif El Khadi

⁵⁸ Interview with Charfiddin Elkelil

their right to protest. Additionally, the fact that a number of the activists came from a legal background (such as Intisar in I-Watch, Charfi in Manich-Msamah, and Yousra in the Pirate-Party) helped to educate other members about their rights. It gave them assurance that they are protected and that their group will defend them if they get arrested, which also nurtures the politics of belonging among youth activist groups. On another aspect, knowledge of the country constitution and laws allows youth activists to confront the authorities.

Youth activists as individuals and groups perceived their relationship with government differently. The Pirate-Party is situated within the traditional political arena as a political party, but despite the challenges the activists faced to register the party, it remains out of the “government radar” because of its small size and limited popularity⁵⁹. While I-Watch collaborated with governmental organizations several times, it organized the 2016 Whistle-blowers ceremony in cooperation with The Commission for Fighting Corruption. It also managed to successfully influence several laws through lobbying at the Parliament such as the law of protection of whistle-blowers and the right of access to information⁶⁰. Other activists had a radical response towards the government, because in their view the government was no longer serving the citizens, therefore they had to fight the corrupted system. Samar Tlili explained “In the social contract between the state and citizens you give up on a part of your freedom in return for services provided by the state. The state did not fulfil its duties, so why should we?”⁶¹. But that does not mean that the relationship with the government is always confrontational, Zyna had a different way to describe the activists-state relationship: “We are not fighting the government itself we are fighting the wrong actions and decisions. Our main role is putting pressure on the government; therefore we have to keep building bridges with the government and open channels for dialogue”⁶².

At various occasions youth activists showed that they had lost confidence in the authority figures but not in the legal systems. For instance, when the public session on the reconciliation law was delayed, youth activists proceeded with their protests because they did not trust the government and as citizens they had the right to protest. This implies that youth activists were aware of their power to pressure the government and eager to exercise it especially in times of uncertainty.

What if we look at the activist-government relationship from the government perspective? Youth activists have been criticizing the government and the president in the streets and on Facebook, mobilizing for protests and occupying public spaces, but there were minimal clashes with the police. This can be per-

⁵⁹ Interview with Slim Amamou

⁶⁰ Interview with Henda Fellah

⁶¹ Interview with Samar Tlili

⁶² Interview with Zyna Mejri

ceived as a progress in comparison to the oppression that the youth activists faced under Ben Ali regime, yet in the civic space it is the state's duty to protect freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression (CIVICUS 2017). In this vein, youth activists are practicing their rights as citizens and the state is fulfilling its duty, therefore when the government banned the T-shirt at Carthage Theatre, they violated citizens' freedom of expression. Evidently, there are attempts from the state to concentrate back the power in its institution, which was not a surprise for Youssef Cherif as he said "When Nidaa Tounes won the plurality of the government seats in 2014 elections, their campaign slogan was to restore the authority of the state"⁶³.

Moreover, the president is accused of bringing back the remnants of the old regime to the government. Between the fear of losing the gains of the revolution and the memories of living under authoritarian regime, youth activists are driven to continue their resistance towards an undetermined future. Khalil described this situation in a short sophisticated metaphor saying: "El-Zein *mshalaken EL-Abdin la'*"; the ousted president name is *Zein EL-Abdin* and the word *EL-Abdin* in Arabic means worshippers or followers, so he said that the president left but his followers did not, then he added "I am fighting those followers"⁶⁴.

⁶³ Interview with Youssef Cherif

⁶⁴ Interview with Khalil Lahbib

6. Conclusion

Since 2011 Tunisia continues to showcase a mind-boggling democratic trajectory in which youth played a substantial role. After the departure of Ben Ali, the political parties that dominated the traditional and polarized political arena undermined youth and limited their participation to certain roles; therefore youth channelled their activism to new spaces and created innovative actions to voice their demands. This led me to a tracing journey trying to allocate the space for youth activism and then to understand how they are able to challenge power structures through that space. In order to answer this I selected the cases of I-Watch, Manich-Msamah, and the Pirate Party who operated at different power levels and advocated for a public cause. Nevertheless, things on the ground were not neatly structured; the size of youth activist groups influenced their work (for example it was a central challenge in the case of the Pirate-Party), and due to the Parliament discussions on the reconciliation law during my fieldwork, I collected uneven observations on each of the cases, which generated more data on the case of Manich-Msamah.

Though the conceptualization of civic space in Tunisia is relatively new, it was useful to detect youth activism at various spaces including political parties, civil society, social movements, streets, local cafés, and the digital space, which manifested in various forms of actions. The continuous motion of youth activists across a number of these spaces resulted in the creation of multiple identities and reinforced the fluidity of civic space.

The mutual experience of living under an authoritarian regime, the feeling of ownership of the revolutionary gains, and the dreams of a 'just society' constructed a cohort of youth activists with a shared identity and influenced their actions. The consciousness of youth activist groups led to adopting a horizontal leadership approach that effectively engaged younger generation and avoided some of the challenges they faced in their previous experiences with the older generation. The youthfulness and innovation of the activist groups actions strengthened the politics of belonging among the groups themselves, and enabled them to connect with other youth who share with them similar past experiences, current realities, and future hopes.

Youth individual and collective agency affected the 'civicness' of their actions, because the youth activists maintained their civility collectively but many of them showed openness towards uncivil actions on an individual basis to avoid endangering their groups. After all, these actions are not consistent and their eventual impact remain uncertain.

The youth activist groups established local and global networks that granted them broader support. At the local level, they reached out to youth in other governorates in order to effectively engage them in their work and shrink the gap between youth in the capital and across the country. At the global level,

youth interacted with international actors for knowledge sharing, solidarity, and rarely financial support. The use of social media (mainly Facebook) significantly influenced the scaling up of the groups' outreach and enhanced the immediacy of their actions. The interplay between the local and the global resulted in the production of hybrid knowledge that is targeted to increase local youth consciousness.

The citizenship discourse legitimized the youth activists' demands and provided them with protection, but at different moments the government violated their rights in an attempt to reinforce its authority. In spite of that, youth activists claimed their space and invented new means to express their demands. When some of the youth activists were banned from entering the theatre with their campaign T-shirts, they brought in the campaign flag instead and continued to wear the T-shirt to work, local cafés, and street protest. The government pressure on the civic space puts Tunisia at a serious crossroads, either to return to the rule of the recycled authoritarian regime or to continue with the resistance.

The application of a civic-driven change (CDC) framework helped to unpack the complexity of the situation and to understand the capacity of youth activist groups to trigger change. The four CDC lenses emerged at different parts of the analysis, nevertheless the politics of belonging and politics of actions stood out sharper than the other lenses. One of the limitations is that the framework could hardly capture the female youth activist struggles in the change process; Tunisian female youth activists equally contributed to the work of their activist groups, and they reflected their gender identity in their means of expressions, but they continue to struggle with the social pressure that their fellow male activists do not face.

This paper does not generalize activism among all youth in Tunisia; yet it is concerned with youth who opted for activism aiming to better understand their capacity to generate socio-political change through the civic space. Youth activists' agency and consciousness were essential elements in shaping the activist group actions, but I was curious to understand: why would they put their lives at risk? And what does stop other youth from joining and contributing to the change process? I still think back of the moment when hundreds of youth activists protested in front of the Parliament on the night of 27th July; thousands of youth were setting at local cafés at the same time. I believe it is important to investigate further these questions since the power of youth action and inaction is affecting the entire Tunisian society; a society that has experienced a process of socio-political change, even though it will take time to realize this.

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Appendix I: List of Interviews

Name	Organization*	Sex	Date&Time	Location
Achref Aoudi	I-Watch	Male	03 August 2017 23:00	The Cast Café
Aly Mehenni	I-Watch	Male	27 July 2017 22:00	In the street in front of the Parliament
Amin Cherif	Pirate-Party	Male	16 August 2017 21:30	Cogite Coworking Space
Asma Sabri	I-Watch	Female	07 August 2017 11:00	I-Watch Office
Charfiddin Elkelil (Charfi)	Manich-Msamah	Male	28 July 2017 14:00	Follow Me Café
Chérif El Khadi	I-Watch	Male	01 August 2017 15:00	I-Watch Office
Hamza Abidi	Manich-Msamah	Male	20 July 2017 14:00	LiberThé Café
Henda Fellah	I-Watch	Female	01 August 2017 16:30	I-Watch Office
Intisar Arfaoui	I-Watch	Female	31 July 2017 18:30	I-Watch Office
Khalil Lahbib	Manich-Msamah	Male	20 July 2017 12:30	LiberThé Café
Layla Ryahi	Manich-Msamah	Female	19 July 2017 16:30	Al-Hana Hotel

* Initial affiliation

Manel Ben Achour	I-Watch	Female	04 August 2017 11:30	I-Watch Office
Montassar Ben Jdila	I-Watch	Male	01 August 2017 12:15	LiberThé Café
Mouafek Zouari	I-Watch	Male	03 August 2017 14:30	LiberThé Café
Myriam Bribri	Manich-Msamah	Female	15 August 2017 08:30	Municipality Theater Café
Samar Tlili	Manich-Msamah	Female	15 August 2017 17:00	Municipality Theater Café
Slim Amamou	Pirate-Party	Male	16 August 2017 22:30	Cogite Coworking Space
Yosra Khadhraoui	Pirate-Party	Female	07 August 2017 19:30	LiberThé Café
Yosra MkaDEM	I-Watch	Female	01 August 2017 16:00	I-Watch Office
Youssef Cherif	Political Analyst	Male	20 July 2017 18:00	Cosmitto Café
Zyna Mejri	Manich-Msamah	Female	21 July 2017 12:15	LiberThé Café