


The Youth's Contribution Towards Civil Society and Democracy in MENA

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he youth have undoubtedly played a key role in social movements throughout the world that have reshaped human history.¹ They have and continue to play their part in democratic activism in varying intensities around the world—from full-fledged democratic revolutions to local civic engagement that promotes democracy. History cites the youth as active proponents in success stories like the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. to the ongoing Boycotts, Divestments, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in Palestine and beyond. For instance, in response to the rigged elections in 2013, a massive number of Pakistani youth made their way to dharnas (sit-ins) under Imran Khan’s call to boycott the government.² Furthermore, in 2017, Imran Khan and his supporters, mainly young adults, brought the offshore accounts of Nawaz Sharif and his family, to public scrutiny, which eventually led the Supreme Court to oust Mr. Sharif from his position of Prime Minister.

Although the youth possess undeniable agency in social movements, they are usually stereotyped as being apolitical. Their disinterest in the political process seems to be a problem many governments around the world face or exploit. Political disinterest can be seen as a government's failure for not indulging the youth. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs asserts that institutions must provide mechanisms for youth to participate in debates in public policy.³ As the youth have a right to be represented and voice their opinion, they may do so by joining civil society organizations such as NGOs, charities, and clubs; creating awareness through technology; or staging demonstrations and sit-ins. As evidence from developed countries indicates, young people who are close to their communities or engage in community-based activities are in less danger of being involved in behaviors that would put themselves and the rest of the community at risk.⁴

Though it is often overlooked, the youth is, in fact, involved in democratic and societal change. The traditional understanding of being politically involved includes activities such as voting, but that is not the entirety of it. Vis-à-vis the findings of a workshop conducted in Canada, it was revealed that although Canadian youth are less likely to participate in traditional political processes, they are actively engaging in non-traditional political activities such as joining environmental groups and initiating and signing online petitions.⁵ It is apparent that in the modern world, young people have found different platforms via technology to promote civic and democratic practices. This trend is true even for non-democratic countries like Saudi Arabia. Aldini asserts that Saudi youth are not only involved in traditional forms of civil society but are now also using social media to interact with what is being labelled "virtual civil society."⁶

The MENA youth have been the driving force of recent movements in the region and have utilized their vast numbers, technology, and social media to challenge the established authority. Traditionally, it has been thought

that the Arab youth are on the periphery of democratic movements, but this discourse of Arab "exceptionalism" and its citizens' perceived somnolence must be reconsidered in the wake of the Arab Spring if not due to other movements before it.

CHARACTERIZATIONS OF MENA YOUTH

The "youth bulge"⁷ proves to be one of the primary reasons as to why the youth were a driving force in the 2009 Iranian revolution and the more recent Arab Spring. According to Lin, youth bulges often develop when countries succeed in controlling infant mortality and simultaneously maintain a high fertility rate, causing a large segment of the population to be comprised of young people.⁸ Usually, developing countries, such as South Sudan, Uganda, Pakistan, and most MENA countries, are characterized by this phenomenon. Almost one in five people living in MENA are part of the "young" segment (15-24 yrs.) of society.⁹ This high population of the youth is an integral factor as to why they came out in large masses to protest and demonstrate against their respective regimes during the Arab Spring. According to Roudi, the population of the youth (15-24 yrs.) in MENA was 88.1 million in 2010 and is estimated to grow to 92.7 million in 2040.¹⁰ Furthermore, the number of youth in MENA is expected to reach its peak by 2035 at 100 million people, after which a decline is expected.¹¹ The greatest takeaway from these statistics is that the MENA youth bulge is not a short term reality which respective governments can simply shrug off – it is expected to last for decades and can either be a demographic dividend or a disaster, depending on how governments respond to it.

Although the lack of education is still an obstacle to progress, the growth in the education sector is a major cause for the recently politically active youth in MENA. MENA countries have spent 5% of their GDP on education during 1980-2000 which is higher than any other developing region in the world.¹² Murphy states that not only has the Arab population experienced a demographic shift towards the youth, but it has also become increasingly more educated than ever before.¹³

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It is assumed, especially in the West, that civic engagement in MENA countries is almost non-existent. While the democratic platform needed for a thriving civil society is not present in most MENA countries, there is still a great number of young people who are active both socially and politically. Research conducted by Mercy Corps, a civil society organization, found that compared to youth in other regions, the Arab youth are generally more engaged in various civic activities.¹⁴ Specifically, Mercy Corps states that the Arab youth's average for protesting is twice as high as the world average, and while they are not as active in civic groups and elections compared to the world average, they are more politically active.

Youth unemployment was cited as a major motivator for the youth in demonstrations before and during the Arab Spring. Roudi asserts that the youth in MENA form a significant percentage of the working-age population: Yemen 42%, Jordan 37%, Syria 31%, Oman 31%, Egypt 31%, Iran 31%, Tunisia 27%, Saudi Arabia 27%, UAE 21%, and so on.¹⁵ A higher number of young people burdens the government as it has to either create jobs or risk high youth unemployment rates – a reality present before, during, and after the uprisings. In 2009, the MENA region had the highest youth unemployment rate and also the lowest workforce participation in the world.¹⁶ Hanafi highlights that the 2009 unemployment rate in Tunisia was 21.9%, 10.4%, and 6.1% for the highly educated, primary educated, and uneducated, respectively.¹⁷ He goes on to say that the decrease in public sector jobs, uncompensated for in the private sector, has played a huge role in the unemployment scenario in the region.

Finally, the advent of the internet and other technologies has led to the widespread espousal of modern Western values and practices. The outside world is connected to MENA, and the youth are highly active in participating in forums through their computers and mobile phones. As of November 2015, the total number of internet users in the Middle East was 123 million, with a population penetration higher than the world—52.2%.¹⁸ This plethora of internet users and the political restrictions in the MENA region have been main causes of much unrest in recent times.



Youth protestors in the city of Sidi Bouzid, the site of the first violent conflicts of the Tunisian Revolution, magharebia.com, Wikimedia Commons 2008.

MENA YOUTH AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The term “civil society” has numerous analogous definitions, as it is an extremely common term. It is frequently understood as the aggregate of NGO and non-profitable organizations, separate from both the government and market, which exist mainly to promote the interests of the public. Civil society mainly includes unions, charities, environmental groups, community organizations etcetera. Civil society and democracy are both inter-related and dialectic concepts as they depend on each other. A well-functioning democracy requires a strong vibrant civil society while a civil society cannot function independently and effectively without a strong democratic system.

Behr and Siitonen explain the progression of civil society and its characterization in the Arab world: in the post-colonial period, the civil societies were controlled by authoritarian governments through coercion and co-optation.¹⁹ Hence, they became extremely politicized and, in more recent times, have developed a religious-secular chasm which has impeded progress. The authors go on to mention that while Islamic foundations and charities form a huge portion of the civil society, other more Western-based civil society organizations including NGOs, unions, and other associational groups have also become widespread. The lack of democracy or democratic values in the MENA region, especially pre-Arab Spring, still restricts the civil society and hence constrains its independence. Halaseh remarks that

because of the restrictions placed on civil society organizations in the Arab world, they are commonly labeled as “Governmental-non-governmental organizations (GNGOs).”²⁰ MENA governments use authoritarian rule to influence and control civil society organizations as they do in other spheres of social being for regime security. These rentier states have historically warranted restriction of political freedoms by not demanding taxes, especially income taxes, from their citizenry, as seen in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Al-Jribia mentions the case of Jordan where the state and civil society have historically had an unsettling relationship due to government regulations.²¹

Boose remarks that the process of democratization relies on a number of factors, including the presence of a strong independent civil society.²² He corroborates this statement by comparing Tunisia and Libya – countries where the respective regimes fell after the Spring – and asserts that Tunisia, due to a strong civil society, achieved a smoother transition to democracy compared to Libya. Before the Arab Spring, the Libyan civil society consisted of only a few GNGOs but other than this was almost non-existent.²³

Albeit restrained, civil society was active in the MENA region even prior to the Arab Spring, as the young generation played a central role in these civil society organizations. While emphasizing the important role youth have played in Iranian politics since more than a decade, Nesvaderani comments that the civil society comprises



Anti-Gaddafi protesters gather outside of a Benghazi courthouse in Libya. Al Jazeera English, Wikimedia Commons 2011.

an abundance of youth groups in movements like the “One Million Signature Campaign,” which aimed to change discriminatory laws against women and children and the “Committee for Defense for Political Prisoners,” which promotes prisoner rights.²⁴ In Egypt, civil society is mostly dominated by religious organizations, although other associational groups like youth clubs also exist.²⁵ Tunisian civil society was established due to the country having the best education sector in the Arab world and also due to a strong middle class that allowed for a vibrant civil society.²⁶

In light of the Arab uprisings, the MENA youth and civil society interacted with each other in distinct ways, including how the youth were involved, how they went beyond mere involvement, and how they created new civil society groups. According to Cavatorta, the Arab Spring figuratively woke up the civil society in the region.²⁷ Furthermore, he suggests that new social actors like MENA’s youth rose up and launched the movements, while taking part in civil activism that went beyond traditional civil society groups. Due to restrictions placed on the civil society, the Egyptians organized under more loosely formed social movements like the Kefaya (2004) and the April 6 (2008) movements that relied heavily on both technology and social media.²⁸ The authors remark that these movements started in the mid-2000s due to the failure of traditional civil society groups in protecting citizens’ rights. This further reinforces how, in some countries and situations, the youth advanced civil society demands without being under the umbrella of civil society before and after the Arab Spring.

The civil society in MENA has enjoyed newfound success, proliferation, and strength due to the youth’s exuberant efforts. Even war-torn Syria has seen the emergence of many new civil society groups that serve as a salvation for millions of Syrian people.²⁹ Since the uprisings, Tunisia has seen a growth of “new youth-led” civil society organizations that include various NGOs.³⁰ In Jordan, the “new vision of civil society” and the increasing focus on education has enabled the youth to initiate change.³¹ Since 2000, young people have formed many new civil society groups as well. Furthermore, civil society organizations in Tunisia were restricted during the old regimes but have since become overseers, educators,

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and lobbyists for civil rights. These examples highlight how the youth have interacted with civil society in the region, not only becoming part of the civil society but in essence breathing new life into it. Simultaneously, the civil society provides a robust foundation for the youth and others to promote civil liberties. The contemporary youth movements in MENA have produced "single-issue NGOs" and are transforming themselves into more organized and structured groups – a prerequisite for civil society success.³² In post-Arab Spring Saudi Arabia, due to the youth's increased involvement in societal change, there is now a vivid recognition of and improvement in the various roles civil society organizations provide.³³ Even in non-MENA countries such as Pakistan, the youth are becoming new agents in the formation of civil society groups. An example of this is "The Pakistani Youth Network" created by 21-year-old Suhel Mashok in an attempt to fix the negative image of the country in the media and to simultaneously provide a platform for young citizens to voice their concerns.³⁴

The role of technology must also be highlighted with regard to the youth and civil society. The youth have channeled their energies and democratic efforts through technology and social media in contemporary times. One of the main factors for the success of the Arab Spring's consolidation efforts was social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. According to The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) enables youth to attain employment and education and even assists in engaging the youth in civil society.³⁵ Modern agents such as bloggers who challenged the traditional notions of civil society, became a "security threat" to the ruling regimes across the regions.³⁶ Technology and agency are thus reshaping established civil society norms and also creating new forms such as virtual civil society. The debate regarding the usefulness of virtual civil society is ongoing in academic discourse, but it is generally found to be an effective way to pressurize and demand transparency from the state. Kittilson and Dalton conducted research in Australia and U.S. regarding virtual social

interactions and whether they contribute to political involvement and citizenship norms.³⁷ They concluded that although social networks cannot entirely replace face-to-face interactions, they have more or less the same benefits that traditional civil society has for political involvement and citizenship norms. It is common knowledge today that youth activists organized themselves using social networking websites during the Arab Spring.³⁸ In Saudi Arabia, the number of Facebook users has more than doubled, from 2.3 to 5.5 million, in two years, with the youth constituting around 70% of said users.³⁹ In Egypt, the initiation of the blogosphere dates back to 2004 during the Kefaya movement, and many important young bloggers cite these demonstrations as the commencement of their online activism.⁴⁰ In authoritarian states like Iran and previously Tunisia, technology plays an innovative role as the youth mold Facebook into an "inclusive public square."⁴¹ The youth have made technology their own and will continue to assert their independence through it.

MENA YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY

It is generally but wrongfully believed that the people in MENA do not want democracy. While not widespread, there were movements calling for democratization before the Arab Spring, as is true for Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, and Jordan where noteworthy movements clamoring for democratization took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁴²

The myriad of demonstrations that amassed under the banner of the Arab Spring were characterized by a lack of religious and ideological rhetoric; the movements were instead unified under the call for democratic and economic improvements. Movements around MENA called for democracy, elections, freedom, and the removal of corrupt governments, without anti-American sentiment either. Throughout the build-up to and during the Arab Spring, there was no ideological cause for conflict between the young protesters, allowing for greater mobilization of the youth despite different backgrounds, religions, and political beliefs represented, whether in

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Tunis, Benghazi, Sana or Cairo.⁴³ The deficiency of ideology and rhetoric should not be regarded as a societal shift from religiosity to complete secularism but rather understood as a demand for individual rights, political freedoms, civil liberties, and gender equality – all democratic principles lacking in the MENA region. The demonstrations of the Arab Spring reveal the inception of a new generation ignited by its hope for human rights, civil liberties, and democracy.⁴⁴

After the allegedly rigged elections in 2009, the Iranian youth, both students and nonstudents, poured out in the streets and demanded democratic change.⁴⁵ Both Iran's 1990s reformist movement and the 2009 Green Movement were led by the youth, demanding political and social democracy along with national development.⁴⁶ In the Saudi Arabian case, exposure to the outside world through the internet and television increased Saudi youth's expectations as well as demands towards social and political rights.⁴⁷ The youth want democratic representation that has been historically denied to them by the ruling Al Saud family. Political restrictions and technological connectivity in the MENA region motivated the youth towards democratic change and protests – both online and in the streets. In Bahrain, a decentralized group of activists known as the "Coalition of February 14th Youth," rejected any superficial attempts made by the government for reform and remained committed to real democratic change.⁴⁸ They organized and initiated the "Day of Rage" on February 14, 2011, which developed into a nationwide movement. Unfortunately, Bahrain, with the military and police assistance of Saudi Arabia and U.A.E. forcibly crushed the democratic movement in the country. In post-Arab Spring Kuwait, the opposition group, consisting of youth movements, student, and trade unions, formed a partnership named the "Opposition Coalition," which called for the dissolution of the Parliament and commanded the creation of a new electoral law with the main objective of a complete parliamentary system.⁴⁹

Similar to the youth's participation and interaction with the civil society, they have also played an integral role in promoting democratization in the region. Civil society and democracy are interlinked concepts, so the youth actively engage with civil society in order to reach the living standards and political freedoms found in modern democracies.

Through the mass demonstrations during the Arab Spring, young men and women have shown their dedication in demanding rights and articulating their objections to their rulers.⁵⁰ During the Spring, the Libyan youth were highly motivated and critical of the Gaddafi regime and came out in droves to protest. Various organizations, like the "Shabab Libya" (Libyan Youth Movement) for example, spread awareness of the protests and became a dispensary for news and videos for the local and global population. The Gaddafi regime's initial response included calling the movement an American conspiracy against Libya and dismissing the young generation as "pill-popping youth" with a lack of obligation.⁵¹ The latter response in Libya was more brutal as was the case in many other countries across MENA.

In response to the Arab Spring protests, there were many democratic reforms offered and implemented in various MENA countries to meet the protesters half way, even though some reforms were only superficial. Kuwait held parliamentary elections; the UAE increased the size of its electoral college; and in Oman, the Sultan increased the minimum wage and unemployment benefits.⁵² Although these reforms were introduced to provide greater democratic freedoms to people, some GCC and MENA countries simultaneously replied with heavier social and political controls such as laws that would regulate the media and internet more strictly than ever before. For example, in 2011, Saudi Arabia extended draconian press laws to online media due to the Arab Spring and its consequences on Egypt and Tunisia.⁵³ Furthermore, Kuwait proposed a law that would allow authorities to restrict internet access and block websites without a just cause,

all under the guise of protecting society or national security. Then in 2012, the UAE updated its own cybercrime law, which made it illegal to insult the government but was worded very vaguely.⁵⁴

An integral reason for the successful mobilization efforts during the uprisings was the pre-revolution attitude shifts of Islamist parties. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Salafi groups in recent times have become accommodative toward democracy and the nation-state, even showing their desire to partake in democratic elections. The Egyptian Nour party, a Salafi group, did exceedingly well in the legislative elections, and Saudi Salafi activists in Saudi Arabia showed support for democracy when they signed petitions demanding an elected parliament.⁵⁵ Islamists that once supported the Jordanian and Moroccan monarchical rule in the past now advocate democracy, emphasizing the shift in attitude. The youth protesters in the Arab Spring augmented this pre-revolution attitude change in the Islamist parties, and although the Islamists and the civil society were not part of the Arab Spring protests initially, they did later join the youth in demonstrations. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt decided to participate in the protests after a few days on the insistence of its younger members.⁵⁶ There are dual implications here, firstly that the general youth participating in the protests motivated the Islamist groups to come out and demonstrate, and secondly that the youth within the Islamist groups also played a part in pushing them to protest.

As mentioned earlier, technology's role in aiding democratic protests and promoting democracy in general cannot be overlooked. Internet use in 2015 for the Middle East, at 52.2%, is higher than the global average of 46.4%.⁵⁷ Internet, television, and cell phones have increased global connectivity and have brought democratic principles from the around the world to the MENA region. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are popular public spaces for political discussion and activism. In 2015, the number of Facebook users in various MENA countries were 4.1 million in Jordan, 2.6 million in Lebanon, 27 million in Egypt, 11 million in Algeria, 12 million in Saudi Arabia, 5.2 million in Tunisia, 6.3 million in the U.A.E., 1.7 million in Yemen, and 2.4 million in Libya.⁵⁸ ⁵⁹ In 2008, the “April

6th Youth Movement” led a national general strike that attracted a 100,000 Egyptians, connected online.⁶⁰ Iran had 32 million internet users in 2009, a fundamental factor in the enormity of the pro-democratic movements prior to the Arab Spring. Before the disputed elections in 2009, the internet was pivotal for Iran's civil society to successfully launch the Green Movement.⁶¹ Moreover, the “Shabab Libya” Facebook group eventually became one of the voices of the Libyan people. In Egypt, a Facebook page entitled “We Are All Khaled Said” helped initiate the revolution that overthrew Mubarak. However, technology is not the sole key here; the people behind these computers and cell phone screens, predominantly the youth, drive these changes. Thus, the youth's agency, not technology itself, led to the Arab Spring.⁶²

ARAB SUMMER: END OF THE SPRING

In the post-Arab Spring environment, where many of the old ruling regimes are still in power, democratic attitudes have changed for the youth and the general society of the region. Although, the Arab Spring failed in many ways, immediately after its end the youth and general society remained supportive of democracy and considered the lack thereof to be a fundamental problem. However, after 2016, democracy became less prioritized by the people.

A 2014 study asserts that since the Arab Spring, overall support for democracy among the countries – Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen – has not declined.⁶³ However, in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia, people



Youth protesters in Alexandria, Egypt in February 2011. Mohamed Adel, Wikimedia Commons 2011.

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are doubtful if their fellow citizens are truly ready for democracy. Arabs do not, however, regard democracy as bad for security or economy as there was no significant change with respect to this between the previous and present studies. Even though the young people in Tunisia (which had a regime change after the uprisings) have concerns about democracy-related problems, they still have faith in the system.⁶⁴ 86% of the Tunisian youth strongly agree or agree that democracy is the best system in contrast to 70% in 2011 and 2013. After 2016, however, young people have become disheartened since the Arab Spring did not achieve its desired outcomes in many countries. Despite the vast numbers and the integral role of the youth in the Arab Spring, they remain underrepresented in the political arena, especially in countries where the old regimes were ousted.⁶⁵

Disappointment loomed in the MENA region because the Spring led to further problems such as rise in extremism and greater youth unemployment. Post-Arab Spring, the world witnessed the rise of ISIS, the inception of civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, the extreme degree of foreign involvement, and the fall in oil prices that led MENA rentier states to cut fuel and energy subsidies. This problematic environment has led to democracy becoming a secondary priority for the youth as evidenced by the Arab Youth Surveys of 2016 and 2017.⁶⁶ ⁶⁷ The surveys each assessed 16 Arab (MENA) countries' youth. The 2016 survey concluded that the Arab youth sees the Arab Spring as having a negative legacy since their concerns over youth unemployment and lack of opportunity were largely unaddressed. The youth are also concerned about oil revenues and want a continuation of fuel and electric subsidies. Most importantly, however, the youth prioritize stability over democracy now. They see the rise of ISIS, threat of terrorism, unemployment, and civil unrest as the top four concerns. Lack of democracy ranked at number 9 (12%) out of a list of major concerns. The 2017 survey saw lack of democracy increasing in priority to number 7 (17%) which is still significantly lower than in the period of the Arab Spring. In 2012,

72% of Arab youth thought that the world was better off post-Arab Spring; this number has drastically declined to 36%. Therefore, in most MENA countries, due to the conflicts, terrorism, and general turmoil, security and stability have become the most pressing needs, dwarfing the democratic reform agenda in these countries.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the survey results do not mean that the youth has become disillusioned with democracy. Instead, they may want a more stable foundation, meaning an end to the civil wars and terrorist threats, so that democracy can become a viable future option. Faisal Al Yafai, a columnist in the National (UAE) newspaper, states:

When the results of the Survey suggest young Arabs think democracy will not work and the Arab republics should prioritize stability, I don't read that as the youth turning their backs on democracy, or even the possibility of change. Rather, I see it as a retrenchment, as a belief that the best way to get personal autonomy and economic prosperity is to first seek stability in an ordered political system.⁶⁹

Unsurprisingly, Arab youth want stability in an increasingly chaotic Middle East and see the Arab uprisings as negative because of their grim aftermaths. The street protests may have subsided but this does not mean that the virtual civil society and the youth in traditional civil society are not still active in demanding personal freedoms throughout the region. Their biggest victory in recent times is reflected in the conservative country of Saudi Arabia which has recently allowed its women to drive cars after decades of women advocating for gender equity.⁷⁰

Furthermore, other recent surveys also suggest that democracy remains the preferred system by many countries in the MENA region. The Arab Barometer (not solely focused on youth) suggests a general optimism toward democracy. Egypt, which has been victim of much instability during and after the Arab Spring,

remains surprisingly optimistic about democracy – 51% prefer democracy over other forms of government.⁷¹ 84% of the Lebanese population, five years after the uprisings, agree that democracy is better than other systems.⁷² In Jordan, too, support for democracy remains formidable, as 86% of the people believe that it is the preferred system although it has its issues.⁷³

Democracy in its purest sense cannot be achieved in rapid fashion; it takes time, resources, extreme will, and, more specifically, a very stable and strong civil society. The period after the uprisings evidences that democracy is not simply a change in political representation and systems but instead a long and tedious process that necessitates a change in political culture.⁷⁴

Although activism for personal freedoms, accountability, and democracy in general are still present, the MENA youth have somewhat muted their outpour over democracy due to more pressing issues currently, giving some breathing space to the respective regimes. The present attitudes, however, are all subject to change if political and economic stability in the MENA region returns, which would place democracy back on a higher priority list. Stability does not necessarily mean another Arab Spring or revolution but when the conditions allow it, can mean a more active civil society and pronounced democratic reformation demand, especially if the governments of these countries remain authoritative in nature.

CONCLUSION

Due to youth unemployment, global connectivity, the internet, government restrictions, and the youth bulge, the young generation of MENA have played a pivotal part before, during, and after the Arab Spring. The youth have interacted with civil society in various ways: they were a part of traditional civil society groups prior to the Arab Spring (and still are presently); they created new youth based groups in civil society during and after the Arab Spring; they advanced civil society objectives while not being part of official civil society; and they have used technology and social media to create a virtual civil society. The youth have not only resurrected the old civil society but have also created new ones. Acting as a life-line and as innovators for the civil and general society,

they have brought hope for democracy in a region often characterized by a democratic void.

The youth's end goal in interacting with civil society was to promote democracy. The young generation is educated, motivated, and connected to the world. Not only did they heavily promote democracy and create mass awareness for human rights, gender laws, and other democratic values, on the internet and in the streets, but they also organized campaigns of unrest so popular and free of strict ideology that the majority of society backed them – religious and secularists alike. In addition, they organized the conservative minded adults and the constrained civil society who, like most, were tired and lacked motivation to carry a democratic movement on their own. The youth bulge will remain a reality for the foreseeable future and will continue to advance democratic values in their societies, despite recent issues such as ISIS and civil wars.

The youth were the champions of democracy and will continue to be in the future. While they have not yet attained all of their goals, the youth have at least shaken the established order, and in some countries toppled it; made the regimes cautious and weary for the future; and brought awareness to the general society regarding the dangers of authoritarian governments. The most important lesson from the Arab Spring is that democracy is not achieved in a day. Even though most MENA youth might see the uprisings as negative and ultimately futile, achieving a pure democracy is a slow process, and perhaps the overhauling of a political system haphazardly in one motion will lead to further problems. Instead, a step-by-step approach towards democracy using gradual reforms would be better suited in MENA due to its historic democratic void. ♦

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