



Empowering the Future: Jordanian Youth's Role in Driving Meaningful Change

GenG - New Generation Program

Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Briefs Series

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Introduction

Jordanian youth, as the country's demographic majority, hold great potential to drive meaningful social change. They bring energy, creativity, and a strong awareness of community challenges, actively engaging in civic and social initiatives through grassroots organizing, digital activism, and participation in civil society, highlighting their vital role in shaping the future. However, despite representing a significant portion of the population, young people in Jordan remain largely disengaged from collective action and formal decision-making. Their involvement in civic and social initiatives is often individualistic, lacking the structured unity needed for lasting impact. Additionally, most youth show disinterest and distrust in politics, with voter turnout among young people signifi-

cantly lower than that of older citizens, and their representation in state institutions is minimal, with a 42% gap in parliamentary representation.

The brief is an output of the Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Labs, conducted by the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), as part of the New Generation Program. It highlights the session titled "Empowering the Future: Jordanian Youth's Role in Driving Meaningful Change," and what political science and law students from the University of Jordan discussed regarding this matter. Following the labs' work methodology, the session featured Dr. Mohammad Jreibi, Director of the Thuraya Center for Studies.

The Role of Youth in Advancing Social Change

To gain a holistic understanding of the role of youth in social change, we need to specify which aspect of social change is being discussed. Theoretically, the ubiquitous definition for social change is “changes in human interactions and relationships that transform cultural and social institutions”¹. While this definition is theoretically sound, it is broad (given its ubiquity) and does not specify which cultural and social institutions are concerned with the change. Since these labs focus on the civic and political participation of young people, it is rational to guide the analysis of the role of youth in social change towards social movements and how to utilize social change to increase trust in the government and increase the political and civic engagement of young people.

Youth and Social Movements: Adaptability, Perseverance, and Narrative Shaping

Young people in Jordan have a hopeful outlook towards the future; they believe that many of the social movements that happened across the time and space had youthful population at the center. Young people’s ability to adapt and withstand tough conditions makes it easier for them to mobilize to achieve their demands. A prime example of this is the 2016 sit-ins organized by the students at the University of Jordan which lasted around 14 days to protest the increase in tuition prices, and the university met their demands eventually².

“The perseverance of young people is the main reason the strike at the university of Jordan succeeded; students brought blankets and slept on campus in severely cold weather”

Lab Participant

It is interesting to note that while the students were met with support from the wider community, the backlash against them by some members of the community and some politicians often manifested in accusing the students of being backed by a political foreign agenda to destabilize the country³. In an attempt to fight these accusations, the students had to ensure the public that there is no “political intent” whether foreign or not behind their protests and that they are only expressing their disagreement with the administration’s decisions.

“To convince my father to vote for my preferred candidate during the 2024 election, I approached him from an economic angle, saying that this party is calling for better economic conditions rather than talking about individual freedoms”

Lab Participant

It may seem at first glance that a depoliticized strike or protest is a contradictory concept, but for young people, depoliticizing their demands offers them more legitimacy in the eye of the public. Lab participants echoed this sentiment during the policy lab, as they claimed the rhetoric used for raising awareness is vital to their end goal; if they want to achieve their demands, they have to depoliticize their language and use a more number-driven and economic reasonings to make their demands more palatable or acceptable to a wider audience or to avoid controversy. This is what young protesters at the University of Jordan did, they focused their narrative on the negative financial and social effects of commercializing education rather than that political implications of making education more expensive. Moreover, depoliticizing the narrative made it easier for different groups across the university to come together, putting aside their political leanings and focusing on the goal at hand⁴.

Raising Awareness: Leveraging Familial Ties and Digital Activism

Raising awareness is a crucial component of community effort which works towards social transformation. The end goal of raising awareness is often mobilizing the power of public opinion in support of an issue and thereby influences the political will of decision makers⁵.

Like social change, raising awareness as a tool for social change, comes in many forms, and this definition focuses on a more macro aspect of influencing others, this is why many people consider protesting as the most effective way of raising awareness. However, given the current political climate and the shrinking civic space, organizing protests is not the easiest form of collective action to be done. Not to mention that young people are an economically disfranchised group and often require parental consent to participate, especially young women.

This is why young people focus on digital activism and employing social media to achieve meaningful social transformation. This type of social mobilization was seen in several online campaigns started, maintained, and led by young people across the world, such as led Fridays for Future movement⁶, inspired by Greta Thunberg, as well as the Sunrise Movement⁷. Not to mention the #MeToo movement, largely led by young people, sparked widespread societal conversations about sexual harassment and assault and influenced legal reforms globally.

These initiatives demonstrate how young people bring fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to global challenges like climate change. Through urgent messaging and digital platforms, they have elevated the issue to the forefront of global conversations, mobilizing millions to demand action from governments.

Another form of raising awareness, which proved common among lab participants, is leveraging familial ties, especially family members younger than them. It is significantly easier for younger people to influence decisions by raising awareness on the micro level rather than on the macro one. This mode of awareness raising has proved successful among young people, as they managed to get their younger siblings to vote or join their cause for social reform.

Challenges Facing Youth Activism for Social Change

Structural Barriers

Jordanian youth have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to drive social and political change. However, while young activists excel at mobilizing for immediate causes, such as the University of Jordan protests against tuition hikes, their efforts often lose momentum due to weak institutional support. Without strong political parties or formal avenues for advocacy, grassroots movements struggle to convert energy into lasting policy reforms. Additionally, Jordan's Cybercrime Law has been effective in protecting people from online violence and other digital threats. However, its broad wording has created some hesitation around digital activism, as people worry about potential consequences. While actual penalties are rare, the high fines mentioned in the law make individuals think carefully before discussing political issues online. Moreover, Jordanian youth also grapple with broader systemic challenges. The global emphasis on individualism over collective action makes it difficult to sustain movements aimed at structural reform. For Jordan's youth to fully realize their potential as agents of change, they need not only greater political access but also a societal shift that values their voices and sustains their momentum beyond protests and social media campaigns.

"It's hard to change the world system when individual needs trump the collective."

Lab Participant

"More and more people are asking me if they can post certain stuff, and my legal advice is often not to post"

Lab Participant

Political Parties: A Broken Bridge Between Youth and Governance

Despite their potential as vehicles for change, and despite the most recent amendments to the political parties' law which imposes several conditions on the 56 existing parties, the most important of which are: having at least 1000 members and allocating 20% of party seats to women and 20% to people from 18-35 and for the party to have members from at least 6 different governorates to ensure representation⁸, young people are still apprehensive when considering joining a political party. Some young people believe that joining a political party would bring them social and professional stigma. One participant highlighted how she was questioned whether she has any affiliations with political parties or not during a job interview.

There is no metric to measure the social stigma surrounding joining political parties as they are constitutionally acceptable⁹

and belonging to a party is protected by law¹⁰, but the perception of a stigma is still there which causes the apprehension of young people. Besides the social stigma, young people believe that most parties are rooted in tribalism rather than ideology, prioritizing regional or familial loyalties over national progress. This lack of vision, combined with concerns about ideological rigidity, leaves many young people disillusioned with party politics.

Political Education & Intergenerational Divides

A critical gap in Jordan's education system is the near-total absence of civic and political education before university. In university, there is no mandated course for political education, especially for students outside the social sciences and humanities schools. While some universities, like University of Jordan, have a mandatory courses titled: ethics and social responsibility and innovation and leadership, they are still not enough to drive home the significance of participating in civic life.

While political science programs exist at higher levels, the lack of foundational exposure leaves many young people unprepared to engage meaningfully in political discourse. For instance, young people are not aware that, by law, they can submit a petition to the parliament regarding public affairs or a personal complaint. This can be done through the parliament's website¹¹.

Compounding this issue is the generational divide: youth often describe older generations as resistant to change, forcing them to adapt their messaging, such as framing arguments in economic rather than ideological terms, to gain traction. For young women, the challenge is even greater, as many conceal their political beliefs to avoid backlash from conservative families, stifling open dialogue.

Recommendations

The Path Forward

Jordan's youth are eager to shape their country's future, but they face systemic obstacles, from political repression and weak party structures to gaps in education and generational resistance. Addressing these challenges requires policy reforms that protect civic freedoms, enhance political education, and encourage youth-inclusive governance. Thus, this brief suggests the following recommendation to ensure the meaningful participation of young people in social change:

1. Integration of youth into official political discourse

Issue: Youth avoid framing issues politically to gain legitimacy which in turn decreases their participation in official political pathways and their impact on the system

Entities to Engage:

- **Ministry of Youth:** Develop programs that teach strategic communication, balancing economic and political messaging.
- **Media companies:** Collaborate on media literacy campaigns to help youth navigate public discourse pragmatically.

- **Civil Society Organizations:** Facilitate safe spaces for political dialogue and narrative-building workshops.

2- Gaps Within Political Parties and the Political System

Issue: Parties lack youth appeal due to tribalism, stigma, and weak structures.

Entities to Engage:

- **Independent Election Commission:** Promote youth-friendly party reforms and track youth representation.
- **Political Parties:** Advocate for internal youth wings and ideological training.
- **Universities:** Advance democratic elections for students bodies within the university and encourage the student body to join on campus parties.

3- Raising Awareness, Mobilization, and Influencing Change

Issue: The confinement of raising awareness within the micro level

Entities to Engage:

- **The Legislation and Opinion Bureau:** Amend vague Cybercrime Law provisions to protect digital activism.
- **Local NGOs:** Train youth in alternative mobilization (activism, podcasts, content creation).

- **Municipal Councils:** Support localized awareness campaigns and the involvement of youth in the decentralization process. (e.g., town halls).

- **National Council for Family Affairs:** Address intergenerational divides through family workshops. Involving tribal leaders in these workshops would be essential, especially to ensure the inclusion of young voices when it comes to internal tribal elections which take place country-wide elections.

4- Education for Civic Engagement & Building Trust

Issue: Lack of civic education fuels disengagement.

Entities to Engage:

- **Ministry of Education:** Build on the established civic education in schools (i.e. social studies) through engaging school children in on the ground civic engagement such as volunteering, meeting with representatives from municipalities and from the parliament, and ensuring the meaningful implementation of democratic student elections in schools. Moreover, implementing a program where older students can teach younger students about civic engagement and help them with volunteering as a form of peer-to-peer education.
- **Ministry of Higher Education:** Mandate university courses on governance (beyond political science majors). And encourage democratic student elections and activate the role of student councils in advocating for students.

The Generation G (New Generation) project was launched within ARDD in 2021 with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands to energize and encourage youth leadership in promoting gender justice. The project aims to promote dialogue between youth and policymakers to influence policy relating to justice, particularly youth and women's rights.

Policy Labs are part of ARDD's research methodology, providing a dedicated space for discussing and researching public policy issues to enhance youth capacities and equip them with the necessary skills to engage in public policy-making processes. The labs also facilitate exchanging opinions with experts and researchers specialized in relevant topics, based on background papers prepared to address these issues.

Established in 2018, The Renaissance Strategic Center is an independent think tank based in Jordan that operates within the organizational framework of the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD).

References

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- 7 <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/>
- 8 2023 الجزيرة نت، "إبراهيم قبيلات، هيمنت عليها «عباءة الفرد».. هل تنتهي أحزاب الأردن إلى مقار فارغة تعتمد على الدعم الحكومي؟"، <https://shorturl.at/Zq0AW>.
- 9 According to Article (16.2) of the Jordanian constitution: Jordanians are entitled to establish societies and political parties provided that the objects of such societies and parties are lawful, their methods peaceful, and their by-laws not contrary to the provisions of the Constitution.
- 10 According to Article (4.C) in the Political Parties' law: It is prohibited to harass students of higher education institutions due to their party or political affiliation or activity.
- 11 https://www.representatives.jo/AR/Forms/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B6%20%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A_15