

# Youth, Revolt, Recognition

The Young Generation during and after the “Arab Spring”

Edited by Isabel Schäfer



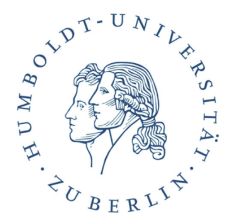
## From The Core To The Fringe? The Political Role of Libyan Youth During And After The Revolution

by Anna Lührmann

MIB-Edited Volume  
Berlin 2015



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**Project „Mediterranean Institute Berlin (MIB)“**

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The MIB publication series is available online at  
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Schäfer, Isabel, ed. (2015): Youth, Revolt, Recognition – The Young Generation during and after the "Arab Spring". Berlin: Mediterranean Institute Berlin (MIB)/HU Berlin.

MIB Edited Volume | March 2015  
Project "Mediterranean Institute Berlin", Humboldt University Berlin; [www.mib.hu-berlin.de](http://www.mib.hu-berlin.de)

HU Online Publikation, Open Access Programm der HU.

To link to this article: [urn:nbn:de:koby:11-100228053](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:koby:11-100228053)  
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## **From The Core To The Fringe? The Political Role of Libyan Youth During And After The Revolution**

*Anna Lührmann*

In 2011, Libyan youth activists – armed and unarmed – were at the core of the revolution and vigorously demanded the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Many harbored idealistic expectations for a rapid transformation of the country and immediate and genuine inclusion in political and economic processes. The first transitional elections took place in July 2012. It seems that the political representation of youth in Libya was higher during the revolution than in the formal institutions of the “New Libya”. How has the political participation of young Libyans evolved during and after the revolution? Youth political participation refers here to the meaningful and effective inclusion of relatively young people in the decision-making process. This broad youth definition includes anyone between 15 and 35. Youth political participation can be divided into consultative, youth-led or collaborative youth participation (Lührmann 2013: 16, based on Hart 1992, Landsdown 2010, Karkara 2011). In this paper, the main focus is on collaborative youth participation, which refers to young people being effectively included in regular political decision-making processes (e.g. as voters, as Members of Parliament (MPs), as members of political parties or advocacy groups).

In many countries, we can observe the following phenomena: Youth tend to be active on the streets, but continue to be marginalized in formal decision-making bodies. In transitional processes, significant frustration is likely to arise if youth are not included in new formal decision-making procedures. This might have a destabilizing effect on the democratization process and accelerate conflict dynamics. It is therefore important to understand barriers to the political participation of youth. Barriers can be found on various levels - individual, organizational and structural (UNDP 2008: 6). This approach will serve as the analytical framework for the second part of the paper. This paper draws on three field visits to Tripoli that included discussions with Libyan civil society representatives, MPs, civil servants as well as representatives of the international community.<sup>1</sup> The empirical analysis is enhanced with data from the 6<sup>th</sup> Wave of the World Value Survey. The conceptual framework draws from a recent publication on youth political participation on behalf of UNDP (Lührmann 2013). As of spring 2014, the political situation in Libya has become highly chaotic and all formal governance institutions are highly contested (Lacher 2014). Hence, this article addresses the revolutionary period in 2011 and the brief period of relative calm in post-Gaddafi Libya until the ouster of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan in March 2014.

### **Taking stock: Political participation of youth during and after the revolution in Libya**

#### *1. Revolutionary Period (February 2011 - July 2012)*

Inspired by the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia, a mostly young movement of Libyans started mobilizing for a “Day of Revolt” on February 17, protesting against the human rights violations of the Gadhafi regime (Lindgren 2013: 210). The arrest of a young human rights activist, Fathi Terbil, on February 15 further fueled protests.<sup>2</sup> The February 17 movement quickly spread throughout the country. Protests were met with severe repression and military action from the side of the regime. During the following civil

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<sup>1</sup> 5-12 July 2012, 6-13 October 2012 and 25-29 January 2013.

<sup>2</sup> BBC Online, 16.2.11.

war, youth took vital roles in the armed militias, media and online activism as well as in humanitarian aid work.<sup>3</sup> The Libyan Youth Movement and other young activists used social media for mobilization and self-organization. There are some indications that these activities played a vital role for the revolution. Lindgren shows in an in-depth analysis of tweets on 17 February how twitter helped activists to subvert Libya's restricted media landscape (Lindgren 2013). The majority of Libyans below 35 indicate in 2013 that they use the Internet daily.<sup>4</sup> Hence, chances are high that online mobilization reached many youth in 2011. Facebook also provided a platform for the Libyan Youth Movement to share news and develop their political agenda (Sommer et al 2013). However, only a small fraction of Libyans seem to have used Facebook in 2010: 2,4 % according to The Guardian (2014). Additionally, the Libyan Youth Movement may have been highly relevant in the initial days of the uprising, but did not emerge as a leading actor in the revolutionary struggle. Hence, online and youth-led activities probably played a vital role in the early days of the Libyan revolution, but they also should not be overrated. Gaddafi did not fall because of twitter but because people took to the streets and because of the civil war and NATO's military intervention.

Already during the revolution, youth were sidelined in important decision-making bodies. In the main governance authority of the revolution and later of the first months of post-Gaddafi Libya – the National Transitional Council (NTC) – Fathi Terbil apparently was the only youth representative present (Murphy 2011). Elder men representing their cities and tribes seemed to dominate the NTC. Traditional non-state governance institutions, such as tribal leadership, are often based on seniority or lineage and hence tend not to encourage the inclusion of youth in political decision-making. After the liberation of Tripoli, an interim government under Abdurrahim El-Keib took office in November 2011. In his cabinet, the above-mentioned young human rights activist, Fathi Terbil, became Minister of Youth. After a brief discussion with him in Tripoli in October 2012, it remained unclear if and how he actually tried or managed to feed youth views in the interim government's decision-making.

## *2. First Transitional Elections and Their Aftermath (July 2012 - Nov 2012)*

The first transitional election in Libya took place on July 7, 2012. 82% of all eligible voters registered and 62% of registered persons turned out to vote (EU EAT 2012: 14, 34). Apparently, "Libyans needed to vote."<sup>5</sup> Local and international observers (Grifa 2012) consistently describe the atmosphere in Libya during the election day and shortly afterwards as "party time".<sup>6</sup> Overall, the elections were perceived as a central achievement of the revolution.

On 8 August 2012, the General National Congress took over power from the National Transitional Council. Congress members had been elected in competitive, multi-party elections. There were several Members of Parliament below the age of 30. Particularly on women's and political party lists, young candidates had a chance. For example, Hana Jibril, a 26-year-old dentist from Misrata, served on the Budget Committee. However, the overall representation of the mostly young revolutionary fighters in the GNC was "weak" (Lacher 2013). The former revolutionary fighters still enjoyed a high

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<sup>3</sup> Der Tagespiegel, 14.10.12.

<sup>4</sup> Data from the 6th wave of the World Value Survey (2013); Frequency of internet use as information source (Under 35/ Over 35): 50%/24% Daily; 11/9% Weekly; 6/5% Monthly; 4/5 % Less than monthly; 30/58% Never; Non-responses are excluded (3%).

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, Western diplomat, Tripoli 9.7.12

<sup>6</sup> BBC News, 7.7.12.

degree of public trust and admiration, but were largely excluded from the official institutions of the “New Libya”.

### 3. Government of Ali Zeidan (November 2012 - March 2014)

Following the elections, it took the General National Congress until November 2012 to appoint a Prime Minister - Ali Zeidan - and to approve his cabinet.<sup>7</sup> In Ali Zeidan’s cabinet, no minister was below 40 years old. The Minister for Youth and Sports, Abdulsalam Abdullah Guaila, was 45 years old when he took office.<sup>8</sup> He left the cabinet together with other members of the Justice and Construction Party (Libyan Muslim Brotherhood) in January 2014.<sup>9</sup> Little is known about his work. I was only able to find the following tweet about his ministry: “Was Stuck in traffic near sports + youth ministry #Libya. Youngest in or out at least 50 and if obesity is a sport they'd get the gold medal.” (@misrati\_free on twitter; 30.8.13). Some civil society organisations (CSO) featuring youth leaders or youth issues were established during and after the revolution (Clément et al 2013). Nevertheless, elder men seem to dominate the political debates in post-revolutionary Libya, for example the Grand Mufti Sadeq Al-Ghariani (Lacher 2013).

### Public Opinion

Regardless of this underrepresentation of youth and tremendous governance problems, such as the deteriorating security situation, the vast majority of young Libyans (64%) still seemed to believe that their revolution was “successful” in summer 2013. This is the finding of an opinion poll conducted by the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies in April/Mai 2013.<sup>10</sup> According to this poll, only 24% of Libyan youth think that their country needs a “revision of leadership.” Likewise, only 11% of young Libyans are reported to believe that the elections were not free and fair as opposed to 38% of Egyptians. According to this poll, the motives for revolution also differ in the three North African countries. In Libya, most respondents cite civil and political rights, whereas in Tunisia dignity and economic conditions were on the minds of youth. In Egypt, corruption was the main concern reported.<sup>11</sup>

The recent wave of the World Value Survey, conducted in Libya in 2013, with a total of 2131 respondents, allows further insights into Libyan public opinion in this crucial phase of Libya’s history (WVS). About half of the respondents are below 35 years (45%). 38% of young respondents state they have attended peaceful demonstrations as opposed to 26% of respondents above 35 (see Figure 1). This resonates with the picture of a “youth revolt.” The data also reflects the recent wave of political activism in Libya. The 6<sup>th</sup> Wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) records attitudes for 39 different countries on the question of participation in political demonstrations. Among all countries, Libya is the country with the highest share of respondents claiming they have attended a peaceful demonstration in the past. On average across the world, 12% of respondents claim to have attended peaceful demonstrations compared to 30% in Libya.

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<sup>7</sup> Libya Herald, 3.11.12.

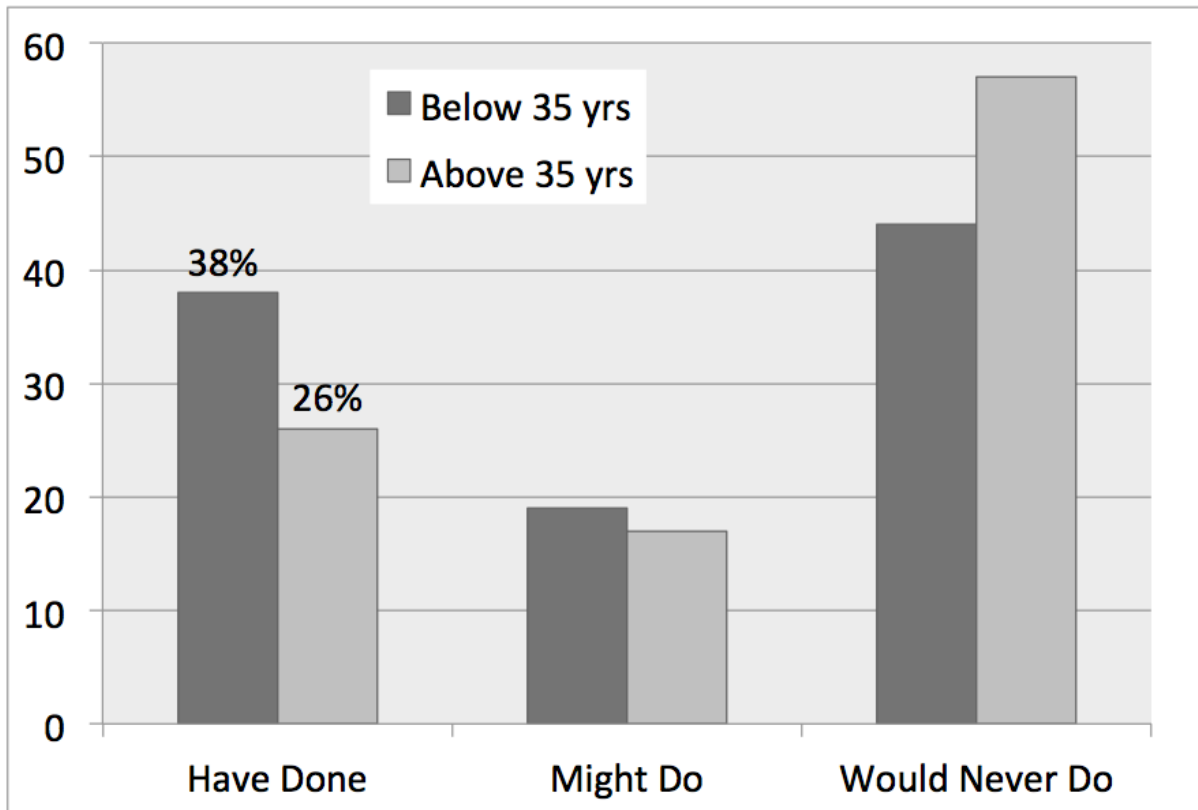
<sup>8</sup> Libya Herald, 3.11.12.

<sup>9</sup> Al Ahram, 21.1.14.

<sup>10</sup> AJE, 30.7.13.

<sup>11</sup> AJE, 30.7.13.

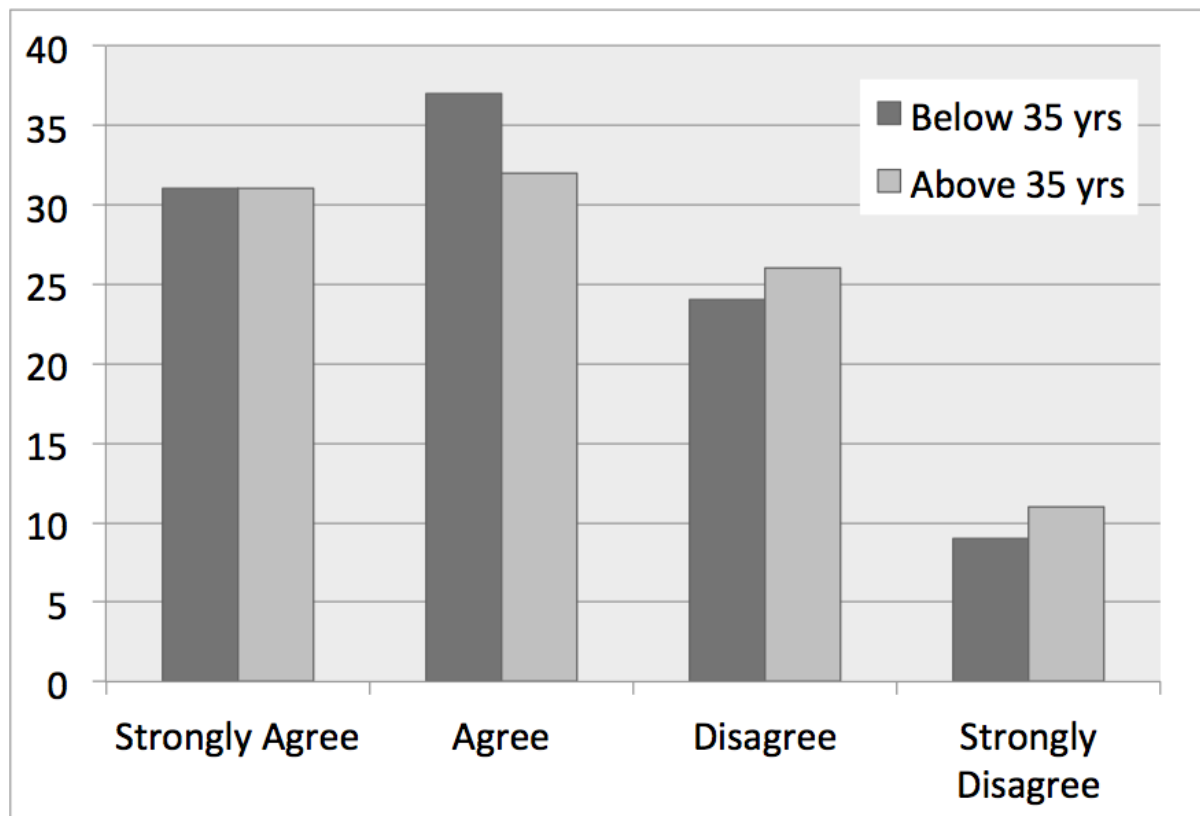
**Figure 1: Attitudes towards Attending Peaceful Political Demonstrations in Libya 2013 (WVS)**



Source: Own illustration based on data from 6<sup>th</sup> Wave of World Value Survey (N=2, 131). The survey participants declining to answer this question are not included here (3%; “Don’t know” or “No answer”).

The World Value Survey also provides some indications about the societal position of youth. On the one hand, 62% of respondents state that most people in Libya would place people in their 20s at a rather low position in society. Correspondingly, 61% would place people in their 40s at a relatively high position. This suggests that there might be a cultural barrier to a higher participation of youth in politics. On the other hand, 69% of respondents state that most people in Libya would accept it if a “suitably qualified 30 year old” was appointed as their boss. Similarly, 65% agree or strongly agree that “old people have too much political influence” (Figure 2). The age group of respondents does not matter for the response rates described in this paragraph. These findings suggest that Libyan society might be willing to accept more youth political leadership in the future, even though they describe the current societal position of youth as relatively low.

Figure 2: "Old People Have too Much Political Power" (WVS Libya 2013)



Source: Own illustration based on data from 6<sup>th</sup> Wave of World Value Survey (N=2,131). The survey participants declining to answer to this question are not included here (9%; "Don't know" or "No answer").

### Youth marginalization in post-Gaddafi Libya: Reasons and Ways Ahead

Based on the empirical findings, the initial thesis – political representation of youth in Libya was higher during the revolution than after - needs to be modified. Youth representation during the revolutionary period and after the election was actually quite similar. Both during and after the revolution, the important role that youth played in the streets and in the militias was not translated into important roles in more formal decision-making bodies. What are the reasons behind this misbalance? In many other countries, we can observe similar phenomena. Youth are active in the streets and continue to be marginalized in formal decision-making bodies (Ellis 2007, Golombeck 2002, MacKinnon et al 2007). Barriers to youth political participation may be found on three levels: individual, organizational and structural (UNDP 2008:6).

The level of *individual capacity* is a starting point for explanation. The mere presence of youth in formal institutions (e.g. as MPs) is not enough. Rather, elected representatives need the capacities and skills to effectively participate in the decision-making process. Here, young people can often be sidelined if they lack knowledge or technical skills to participate meaningfully. However, in Libya in 2012 this point should not have been relevant, as all MPs were new to their job. Youth representatives also have the advantage that they were not involved in high ranks of the Gaddafi regime and hence may have a higher credibility. Therefore it is actually surprising that the Libyan



interim authorities did not tap into the fresh resource of young personnel more often. During the transition process in Eastern Europe, young technocrats quickly rose to become ministers in the 1990s. Particularly in the light of Libya's Integrity Law, the Eastern European experience might be an interesting inspiration for the Libyan case. The Integrity Law, passed in May 2013, excluded anyone with responsible positions under Gaddafi from political offices and hence decimated the pool of available political leadership personnel (Lacher 2014: 2). This opportunity to give young people more political responsibility was regrettably missed.

On the *organizational level*, functioning civil society organizations or political parties that may be intermediaries between the youth population and the political elites are lacking. There are some active youth civil society organizations (e.g. H2O), but their outreach to youth particularly outside of a narrow elite is doubtful. Instead, many young people continue to be organized in armed militias. With weapons in their hand they storm ministries and parliaments in order to fight for their demands – often successfully.<sup>12</sup> It will be critical for the “New Libya” to find a way to channel political grievances in peaceful and constructive deliberation processes. This would also foster the meaningful engagement of youth.

The restrained political role of youth might also be attributed to patriarchal social constraints in the societal environment, giving limited room to the equal participation of youth and women. The transition from childhood to adulthood in the MENA region is often characterized as period of “waithood.” Young men spend their most energetic years waiting for a job in order to be eligible for marriage. Due to persistent political and social exclusion, youth are left in a passive state (UNDP Egypt 2010). The revolution has not managed to break away all of these barriers. The analysis of the World Value Survey data suggests that young people still have a lower social status in Libya than people in their 40s. However, the survey data also shows that a vast majority of Libyans seems to believe that the older generation holds too much political power. This discontent might eventually lead to behavioral and social change, and allow for the inclusion of youth in the political process. Additionally, it has to be considered that Libyan society is deeply fragmented into numerous groups – tribal, religious, regional (Lacher 2013). It is probably safe to assume that for many youth the similarities with other, older people from their alliance are higher than with other youth from opposing (political) groups. In other words, factors other than age might matter more for political identity and societal cleavages.

## Conclusion

Compared to their vital role during the revolution, the inclusion of youth in formal decision-making bodies in post-revolutionary Libya was meager. This can be attributed to various factors, mainly in the organizational and structural realm. In order to further shed light on this issue a comparison with neighboring Egypt might be fruitful. The solution to end youth exclusion from political processes does not lie in the capacities of individual youth alone. Political structures and processes have to change in order to include the voices of young people and their procedural preferences. In a nutshell, the socio-political environment, organizations and youth all have to change in order to move closer together. Unfortunately, many activities aimed at enhancing youth political participation target

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<sup>12</sup> Libya Herald, 12.2.13.

individual capacities only and neglect the social and political environment. This is not enough to substantially enhance youth political participation.

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