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From Arab Spring to Generation Z: Youth Activism and Mobilization in Tunisia and Morocco

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Abstract

Youth movements have been significantly influenced by the Arab Spring in North Africa, particularly in Tunisia and Morocco, among Generation Z. However, there is limited comparative research examining how digital activism, socio-economic grievances, and political systems influence contemporary youth mobilization in both countries. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the features, drivers, and forms of Gen Z activism in Tunisia and Morocco and to examine the influence of political contexts on youth political participation. Methodologically, the study adopts a structured comparative review of academic and institutional literature rather than a primary analysis of social media content. The results show that Gen Z activism is becoming more decentralized, issue-based, and digitally driven, with gaps in employment and inequality, and the lack of trust in political institutions being major drivers. The study suggests greater youth inclusion, as well as addressing socio-economic inequalities. The findings suggest that, while still constrained at the structural and political level, digital activism reshapes and transforms political engagement in the area.

Keywords: activism; Arab Spring; Generation Z; Morocco; Tunisia

1. Introduction

Youth have always played a major role in politics and were the primary actors of political, social, and economic protests and revolts in North Africa in 2010–2011 [1]. The revolts highlighted that political activism and participation among youth could be more than formal—meaning conducted through parties and elections—but also through collective mobilization, street mobilization, and digitally enabled activism [2]. This article uses "Generation Z" as a conventional cohort label rather than an author-defined political category. It is defined, in the same way as Statistics Canada [3] as people born in the period from 1997 to 2012. Members of this cohort were therefore no older than 14 during the 2011 uprisings. For that reason, the Tunisian Revolution and the 20 February Movement in Morocco are not analyzed in this work as movements of Generation Z but rather as catalyzing movements that affected the political and digital climate that Generation Z is inheriting. A long history of persistent economic insecurity, a global digital age, political disillusionment, and the rise of social media as a new political platform for expression and collective action have defined this generation [4].

Studies of youth populations in North Africa suggest that the political activism of the early Arab uprisings was not eliminated but instead evolved into an emerging political activism that is adaptive, decentralized, and issue-based [1,5]. In the Maghreb region (Tunisia and Morocco), there has been massive disillusionment among youth towards

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formally established structures such as political parties and elections. Along with most formal institutions [1]. The general level of disenchantment with formal institutions has caused many younger activists to seek alternative avenues for engagement in political activism, such as through the internet, through participation in social movements, art, and through the development of informal civic institutions [4]. The youth movements in North Africa seem to be swapping ideologically based political activism for issue-oriented activism, which is based on networks, as opposed to being ideology-based [5].

During the transformation of the Arab Spring into democracy and maneuvering through a new system of government, Tunisia presents an interesting case to research this pivotal transition since many consider it the most successful of transitions to democracy following the Arab Spring [6]. Tunisian youth were major participants in the 'January Revolution' of 2011 and engaged in street protests against unemployment amongst the youth, as well as against corruption and authoritarianism. Following the revolution, many Tunisian youths have expressed dissatisfaction with the economic and social benefits that have yet to come from the democratic transition [5]. In addition, youth were heavily featured at the forefront of revolutionary narratives; however, since 2011, youth continue to suffer from many social issues, including unemployment, inequality, inflation, and other macroeconomic issues, which in turn produce perceptions of marginalization and disappointment among this generation [1]. This led to an increase in unconventional political activity from young people, challenging the political elites and the limits of the system of representative democracy [7].

The majority of the latest sources indicate that online activism has both domestic and international impacts on youth activism in Tunisia [1]. The young activists even base their work on their own social experience, as well as being informed by the trends of global digital culture and the trends of international politics. It is this combination of local and global that has been termed a globally localized manner of political identity and involvement [7]. It has caused the youth to take up more short-term campaigns and specific problems, such as corruption, police brutality, and governmental responsibility, rather than long-term ideological movements [5]. The post-2014 Tunisian protest campaigns are thus said to mark a cultural shift in protest strategies with creative street mobilization, internet engagement, and symbolic resistance, alongside the traditional approaches to protesting [8]. More importantly, these campaigns typically are based on small micro-networks, participatory structures that refuse the traditional vertical chains of command and the centralization of leadership [8].

In Morocco, youth activism emerged within a unique political environment featuring limited pluralism and palace politics [1]. The Arab uprisings did not result in any collapse of the regime in Morocco, and the 20 February movement demonstrated the types of collective mobilization of youth and their ability to mobilize around the problems of injustice, inequality, and the violation of civil liberties and freedom of expression [9]. Formal electoral integration among Moroccan youth is still limited. There is limited formal participation of young people in Moroccan electoral processes. Immediately before 2021, 94.4% of citizens aged 60 and over were registered to vote, while only 33.6% of citizens aged 18 to 24 were registered to vote [10]. These figures relate to voter registration, not to electoral participation, party membership, or voter turnout, but show a significant age gap in voter incorporation in the electoral register. Motivated by a strong presence of the monarch in the decision-making process, many Moroccans believe that political parties are ineffective [1].

Consequently, many activists opt for alternative methods of contention outside the institutions, such as online activism, protest movements, and campus activism, instead of pursuing formal political careers [7].

Furthermore, the 20 February movement used digital media in reshaping the political participation of the Moroccan younger generations [1]. Through social media, activists could organize themselves and share information, circumvent state-owned media, and develop new political awareness and public scrutiny [9]. Thus, cyber activism has paved the way for the institutionalization of non-institutional practices, and it has promoted a challenge to mainstream political discourses on corruption, the supreme authority of the king, and civil liberties [8]. Again, like Tunisia, many of the youth movements in Morocco operated on an informal, online networking basis rather than in a hierarchical organization that was found in much of North Africa, with all their leaderless and horizontally organized activism [9].

Tunisian and Moroccan mobilizations of Gen Z constitute part of a far broader phenomenon of digital mobilization in the regions of the Global South. Paasonen [10] describes contemporary digital youth activism as a 'hybrid algorithm of activism' that offers apps like TikTok, Facebook, and Discord as communication platforms for self-representation, as environments for symbolic resistance, and as spaces for developing political affiliation. Digital activism allows the expression of other issues that are of concern to people at a local level, such as unemployment, inequality, corruption, and marginalization, to be connected with symbols, stories, and protest tactics at the international level. Nevertheless, researchers warn that digital mobilization cannot replace offline action and protest, as it is offline action and protest that have the potential to create much-needed change [11].

The second important aspect in defining youth activism in Tunisia and Morocco is socio-economic deprivation. Evidence has shown that the youth's marginalization from the economy, unstable employment conditions, and the reduction in social benefits have been connected to withdrawal from the formal political system and participation in contentious politics, as shown in numerous studies [7]. Finally, there are quantitative studies conducted on Arab Mediterranean countries that show how ambiguous employment status and economic precarity are both significant risks for participating in protests and inciting political unrest among segments of youth [10]. In Tunisia and Morocco, these are some of the factors that contribute to the sense among many youth that protest politics and informal activism offer a broader range of political activity than elections or party affiliation [7].

Recent studies indicate a period of stagnation in youth political involvement or participation in Gen Z's activism in North Africa during the transitional phase in Tunisia, as well as in Morocco. Youth activists often prefer digital-first, decentralized, and issue-specific mobilization rather than formal politics, as seen in the Republic of Tunisia after the revolution, or the monarchy of Morocco with executive power [1]. Thus, contemporary youth movements are a reflection of the whole array of transformations in adaptive online–offline networks, the creative reconfiguration of protest, and the decentralization of participation—all focused on demands for dignity, accountability, social justice, and inclusion [4]. This research, therefore, emphasizes another significant comparative deficit in the literature—the effect of political systems on Gen Z mobilization—and highlights the youth activism's transformation in North African societies as well.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Youth and the Arab Spring

Youth are considered major actors in the Arab uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, especially in Tunisia and Morocco, where youth protest activities attracted considerable attention. Many early accounts of the Arab Spring tended to see the movements as "youth revolutions," with emphasis on the role of educated but economically marginalized young people, challenging the authoritarian governments and demanding political reform, social justice, and economic opportunities [12,13]. Structural

grievances—particularly unemployment and poverty, social inequality, corruption, and political repression, focused mainly on the younger generation in the region—have consistently been shown to be major causes of the uprisings [14]. Youth unemployment rates in the Middle East and North Africa also stayed high after the uprisings, and studies further revealed frustrations among young people regarding the lack of ability of governments to solve socio-economic inequalities [1].

However, more recent scholarship challenges notions of youth as a revolutionary power, narrowly defined on its own terms, both because of its complexity and because it is part of wider "mobilized publics", which include workers, civil society organizations, and marginalized social groups [15,16]. Abbott et al. [15] argue that this focus on youth exceptionalism obscures social partnerships that were involved in mobilizing individuals during the Arab uprisings.

In the same vein, Babatunde [16] suggests that youth participation became essential; however, the causes and outcomes of the uprisings were multifaceted, as other structural and institutional factors allowed for the dynamics of protesting. This perception opposes idealized descriptions of the Arab Spring as a mere youth democratic awakening and situates youth within a larger socio-political movement.

In addition, post-Arab Spring researchers say that young people of North Africa are quite disappointed by the political transition and democratization [17]. For instance, youth were key drivers of ousting the regime of Ben Ali in Tunisia, but they have considered that the transition following this revolution has failed to achieve socio-economic expectations, with even poorer perspectives for employment, social justice, and political participation [6]. Gabsi [18] states that many young Tunisians were excluded from decision-making systems and remained marginalized in the economy, in spite of the democratic reforms and electoral procedures. As elsewhere, the political transformations following the uprisings in North Africa became what Asseburg and Wimmen [19] call "open-ended", with political elites curbing the potential for change by the youth movement and reaping the political benefits of the uprising.

Fragmentation does not necessarily indicate the disappearance of activist networks or political memory. Taylor [20] develops the concept of abeyance to explain how movements preserve activist identities, relationships, and tactical knowledge during periods of reduced public mobilization. Meyer and Whittier [21] further demonstrate that movement spillover occurs when activists, interpretive frames, and protest tactics move across organizations and political arenas. Transposed to the post-2011 situation, applying these concepts is useful in explaining how these earlier protest repertoires may shape current young protesters without equating young protest participants in 2011 with those of Generation Z. Most of the youth campaigns were local, informal, and issue-oriented, rather than turning into political movements [22]. Youth activists in the Maghreb increasingly moved away from traditional political-party practices and engaged in various forms of decentralized civic activities, online campaigns, cultural activism, and local-level initiatives, among others [1]. This transformation reflects the lack of confidence in political institutions and the distrust of political practices, particularly on the part of young people, who believe that the political system is unable to make a difference or be responsive [7].

2.2. Generation Z as a Political Actor

More recently, research has focused on Generation Z and their attributes, i.e., global digitality, economic turmoil, and the influence of the Arab Spring [23]. Generation Z is widely regarded as the first generation of 'digital natives', characterized by the presence of social media platforms, digital communication, and digital technology in their daily social and political experience since childhood [22,24]. Research on Generation Z's digital

political culture indicates that online information environments can shape institutional trust, political attitudes, and modes of political participation [22]. As a group, Gen Z may experience political discourse more so in transnational digitalized spaces than in state institutions, traditional media, and formal educational institutions [22].

Mannheim's [25] theory of generations proposes that people located within the same historical period may develop related understandings of social and political change when they experience significant events under comparable social conditions. These shared experiences for the generation of contemporary youth activism in North Africa feature pre- and post-Arab Spring conditions, enduring economic precarity, high rates of unemployment, authoritarian persistence, and amplified engagement with global digital cultures [23]. These experiences have led to a kind of political culture skeptical of both traditional institutions and the political elite [22,25]. Comparative studies suggest that, while Gen Z individuals have high levels of awareness of public affairs, they also show mistrust of parties, governments, and formal political systems [22].

In addition, research indicates that Gen Z individuals are more likely to engage with issues and/or be part of a cause-related campaign than to engage in formal politics in their country through political parties and voting [23,26]. Outside North Africa, comparative studies reveal that the political role of Gen Z is not limited to cognitive aspects; rather, it exhibits both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, such as political information-seeking or expressing political opinions, participating in post-vote protests or collective action, and voting in elections [27]. These forms range from individual to collective engagement, shaped by online information environment(s) and spaces where political expression can be conveyed. However, their particular manifestations are still shaped by national-level institutions and political conditions. This preference is influenced by broader developments, i.e., by higher levels of more important personal, digital, and indirectly organized political involvement and interest in politics.

In the meantime, academics caution that it is tempting to assume that Gen Z is indeed inherently progressive or even a political generation [26]. The political attitudes of youth remain subject to the national political system, economic and class differences, and culture. Issues of unemployment and social inequality, as well as political repression, continue to influence Gen Z individuals, determining their experience and attitude to political participation and future life in North Africa [28]. So, Gen Z activism is also an indicator of new things that the digital realm opens up, as well as old institutions.

2.3. Digital Activism and Networked Movements

As digital media gains more influence and dominance, its impact on political activism and mobilization has changed (in North Africa and elsewhere). According to Castells [29], digital networks facilitate the creation of horizontal and decentralized forms of mobilization, which are quite the opposite of traditional vertical forms of political engagement. Through means of social media—Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok—information, symbolic participation, and collective identities are transmitted and created among a geographically remote audience [30].

Digital activism predates contemporary social media platforms. The studies on alter-globalization factions have shown that network-based organizational patterns played a very large part in the transnational activity of the movements before the arrival of Facebook and Twitter [31]. With the expansion of social media platforms, these technologies became important instruments for coordinating collective attention and protest in cases including the Arab Spring, Spain's indignados, and Occupy Wall Street [32]. In turn, social media transformed contentious politics by lowering the cost of communication and increasing the speed of information-sharing, as well as providing an opportunity for greater surveillance,

manipulation and repression [33]. Digital communication, however, does not replace organization-making labor, and social movement organizations can actively shape collective arrangements that connect digital mobilization to collective action more broadly [34].

This type of mobilization is based on 'networked movements' that operate without centralized organizational structures and mobilize people by relying on digital tools [35].

According to research findings on digital activism, online space provides the opportunity for 'connective action', which is carried out through personal engagement instead of collective ideology [30,35]. This type of activism is especially relevant to Gen Z individuals as they often engage in politics via digital communications and online identity construction [36]. Networked movements are characterized by high dependence on fast communication, visual images, and the use of symbols, hashtags, and memes, with the help of organizing platforms that are decentralized without institutional leadership [35,36]. This is one of the reasons why many modern youth programs are referred to as "leaderless" [37], although scholars contend that the informal coordination structures continue to play many important roles behind the scenes.

Digital media's influence in the context of the Arab Spring has been quite significant in helping to coordinate protests, spread information, and disseminate an anti-regime narrative that transcends national boundaries [38]. But academics argue against technologists and see the use of social media as one of the factors that facilitated such mobilization [38]. The lack of employment options, corruption, authoritarianism, and economic inequalities continued to be key mobilizing triggers [1,12]. Digital technologies were used mainly for enhancing opportunities to communicate and boost group identities but not for the purpose of replacing offline activism and organizing configurations [37].

More generally, the activation of Gen Z is assuming the characteristics of a "networked movement" mobilization, typical of online coordinated campaigns, as in the case of Morocco. Digital activism provides Moroccan youth with opportunities to express dissent, disseminate alternative narratives, and mobilize regarding social issues in a political context marked by a controlled reform platform and high levels of state surveillance [39]. It is an example of how digital spaces can expand the opportunities for participation in constrained political contexts.

2.4. Comparative Political Contexts

Political contexts influence both youth mobilization and digital activism in North Africa; given their differing post-Arab Spring political opportunity structures, the countries of Tunisia and Morocco have been the subject of many comparative studies [39]. Tunisia, after the 2011 revolution, had gone through a relatively open political process within the North African region, especially in the early years of the democratic transition [40]. However, this characterization is period-specific: institutional checks and balances, political pluralism, and freedom of expression online have weakened since President Kais Saied consolidated his power in July 2021 [41]. Moreover, Tunisians continue to grapple with unemployment, regional inequalities, and corruption, and they feel the Arab Spring had little political impact on socio-economic conditions [18].

By contrast, Morocco is widely categorized as a hybrid regime marked by controlled political reforms and a dominant monarchy [39,42]. Morocco instead enacted piecemeal reforms that served to contain protest while keeping the monarchy as a central component of the country's political structure [38]. It has been suggested that the implementation of controlled reforms has decreased the probability of a major regime change while also limiting the prospects for meaningful democratic engagement [39]. Moroccan youth activism, therefore, takes place within relatively constrained parameters and leads to increased reliance on informal activism and online mobilization [2].

Similar comparisons between Tunisia and Morocco also show both countries facing continued high levels of youth unemployment and exclusion from the labor market after the Arab Spring, even following some post-Spring economic and social reforms [28]. Unemployment continues to be a source of discontent and distrust of the formal political process [18]. Consequently, while the internet may provide some openings for activism and youth mobilization in the region in spite of political structures, economic and social factors continue to have major effects on the extent and scope of youth activism in the MENA region.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study brings together two complementary approaches: political opportunity structure and connective action. The first illuminates institutional openness, state responses, and political constraints, and, with this, how mobilization is possible; the second illuminates how digital contexts enable flexible and decentralized participation. The combination allows the examination of how similar socio-economic grievances and digital affordances produce different forms and outcomes of youth activism in Tunisia and Morocco.

3.1. Political Opportunity Structure

The political-opportunity perspective is an attempt to understand mobilization by comprehending the linkage between collective actors and the institutional context in which they act. Political opportunities can encompass access to political institutions, division among political elites, influential allies, and shifts in the state's capacity and/or willingness to suppress dissent [43]. Grievances are therefore not assumed to produce sustained collective action automatically. Their political impact varies according to the opportunities, resources and constraints facing potential participants. Research on nonviolent mobilization similarly indicates that grievances require supportive political and organizational conditions before they generate sustained collective action [44].

For purposes of this study, political opportunity structure is measured by four indicators: institutional access, state response to protest, legal constraints and surveillance of protest, and the number of formal and informal channels of participation. Within this framework, there is a grievance mechanism through which relative deprivation is introduced. Perceived disparities between expected and actual economic or political conditions may contribute to dissatisfaction, but grievances alone do not explain when mobilization occurs or whether it produces lasting outcomes [45]. This framework allows consideration of the distinct forms of activism that could emerge from the problem of unemployment, inequality and institutional distrust in Tunisia's evolving post-revolutionary regime and Morocco's more consistently limited monarchical regime.

3.2. Connective Action and Digital Repertoires

The connective-action perspective explains digitally mediated mobilization through the personalized circulation of political content across communication networks. Connective action differs from forms of collective action that rely largely on formal membership and a shared organizational identity; it coordinates participation by personalized messages requiring relatively low levels of commitment, with adapted messages spreading through digital platforms as well as collective networks [46]. This perspective is especially important in decentralized and issue-specific networks of activism as it suggests that people can join without sustained membership of a political party or movement organization.

Online and offline should not be considered distinct modes of activism. However, studies have shown that digital communication can play a role in identity construction, information sharing, community creation, and collective action offline [47]. Digital platforms

may therefore reduce communication barriers and extend the reach of mobilization. However, they do not eliminate the organizational work required to sustain collective action. Formal organizations and informal networks of activists continue to influence the process of transforming online attention into ongoing collective action [34]. Moreover, under conditions of surveillance, the visibility enabled by digital platforms may simultaneously facilitate coordination and expose activists to identification, prosecution, or repression.

3.3. Integrated Comparative Application

These two perspectives are consistently followed by five dimensions of comparison: socio-economic grievances, political opportunity structure, state response, digital repertoire and political outcomes. Political opportunity structure is employed to analyze the impact of institutional openness, repression, surveillance and co-optation in the process of mobilizations. In that respect, connective action is explored as regards personalized political communication, horizontal coordination, digitally enabled participation and the linkage between online and offline activism. Socio-economic discontent is regarded as a grievance mechanism and not as an adequate explanation of collective action.

Generation Z is used as a bounded cohort category rather than as an independent causal theory. The research therefore seeks to answer the question of how contemporary Generation Z activism is different from that which gave rise to the 2011 uprisings, and how it situates itself within political and digital spaces created by these uprisings. A comparative matrix of such analytical dimensions allows us to assess the combination of similar grievances and digital practices when compared to Tunisia and Morocco, which have different political systems and forms of state control.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Methodology

This study adopts a structured comparative review to examine contemporary youth activism in Tunisia and Morocco. The unit of analysis is not individual content published on social media, but the social media source. It relies on existing literature from academic and institutional reviews of youth political participation, protest mobilization, digital activism, socio-economic grievances, political opportunity structures, state responses, and political outcomes.

Tunisia and Morocco were chosen not only because both countries faced significant political transformation following 2011 but also because they have evolved distinct political opportunity structures. Tunisia underwent a democratic transition followed by democratic regression, whereas Morocco retained a monarchy-centered political system characterized by limited reform and centralized authority. This comparative design allows the study of similarities concerning youth grievances and digital repertoire, while at the same time analyzing how differences in institutional and coercive environments impact mobilization and its consequences.

4.2. Data Collection

The review was limited to the secondary academic and institutional sources cited in the manuscript. This included peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters, governmental publications, reports from international and non-governmental organizations, and policy-oriented studies. Sources were specifically retained when they provided evidence pertaining to youth political participation, protest mobilization, digital activism, socio-economic grievances, political opportunities, state responses, surveillance, or political outcomes related to Tunisia and/or Morocco.

The study did not collect or analyze social media posts, user profiles, comments, hashtags, or other primary platform data. Digital activism and online political participation are mentioned on the basis of reported results in the reviewed literature and not on an original dataset of digital traces. As a result, the review does not pretend to reflect exhaustive or systematic coverage of the literature in accordance with a pre-registered search protocol.

4.3. Analytical Procedure

The reviewed evidence was organized according to five common analytical dimensions: socio-economic grievances, political opportunity structure, state response, digital repertoire, and political outcomes. Political opportunity structure was investigated based on institutional access, legal restrictions, state tolerance/repression, surveillance and formal/informal channels of participation. Digital repertoire was investigated by means of personalization of political communication, horizontal coordination, symbolic participation and the connection between online communication and offline action.

The evidence was first aggregated separately for Tunisia and Morocco, then compared across the same five dimensions. Relative deprivation was regarded more as a grievance mechanism, as it did not provide a sufficient explanation of mobilization. The analysis therefore distinguished between the conditions that generate dissatisfaction and the political and organizational conditions that influence whether dissatisfaction develops into sustained collective action.

Sources that did not specify the ages or birth years of the people who were the subject of the article or report but instead used the term "youth" were interpreted as reflecting contemporary youth activism and were not used as direct evidence related to Generation Z. Only responses from studied populations across the 1997–2012 birth cohort were considered Generation Z-specific.

4.4. Ethical Considerations and Data Protection

The study analyzes published academic literature and publicly available institutional documents. It does not collect, reproduce, archive, quote, or profile identifiable social media users or process primary personal data. Evidence related to online activism is collected in broad terms only, and no username, account identifier, profile data or digital trace is held. This also prevents the greater visibility of activists using means where online activity could be subject to surveillance, identification, prosecution or reprisal.

4.5. Methodological Limitations

Because the review was not based on a documented systematic search protocol, it cannot claim exhaustive coverage of all relevant scholarship. In addition, the literature available uses general definitions of youth, not a clearly defined cohort of Generation Z. As such, the findings are to be regarded as one means of comparative synthesis of the current concepts of youth activism, which does not necessarily include members of Generation Z. The design allows for analytical comparison but does not allow for statistical conclusions to be drawn for all youth in Tunisia or Morocco.

5. Case Study: Tunisia

5.1. Context

Post-2011 Tunisia, despite the democratic transition following the Arab Spring, encountered socio-economic instability. Mansouri [6] indicates that the instability in Tunisia was observed among younger generations who expected, in the wake of the revolution, greater economic and political inclusion. Tunisia's youth unemployment crisis has remained one

of the most significant drivers of dissatisfaction among young citizens, particularly in marginalized interior regions where economic opportunities continue to be limited [18]. Tunisian youth discontent with democratic institutions has grown because of the failure of successive governments to address inflation, corruption, and unemployment [28].

Many young Tunisians, scholars contend, are increasingly seeing the post-revolution political elite as out of touch with the social realities faced by ordinary citizens [19]. Another factor leading to falling confidence in parliament, political parties, and electoral processes among Generation Z activists was political instability following the revolution [6].

Furthermore, Karoui [5] adds that Saied's leadership has eroded belief in institutional politics and triggered fears of a potential dictatorship revival among Tunisian youth activists. Meanwhile, Thyen [7] claims that Tunisia is still plagued by significant social inequality between areas due to the underdevelopment and marginalization of rural parts in the Tunisian countryside vis-à-vis urbanized areas around the Tunisian coasts. Such inequality has been a factor in social alienation among Tunisian youth, as they have protested against informal activists and their activism, believing that formal democracy does not guarantee them a better life with the reforms they desire [8].

5.2. Characteristics of Contemporary Youth Mobilization

According to [8] contemporary youth activism in Tunisia took the form of fragmented protests, which were aimed at socio-economic issues and located in the streets, rather than in social places. Contemporary youth movements in Tunisia addressed issues like unemployment, corruption, police violence, and social justice rather than larger revolutionary statements [5]. In addition, unlike their predecessors, Tunisian youth activists rely heavily on decentralized and horizontal organizing modalities that reject traditional hierarchical political structures [1]. According to Paasonen [10], following the Arab Spring, digital means of communication became increasingly critical to mobilization strategies employed by Tunisian youth movements. As such, social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, were used by youth to express themselves politically, coordinate campaigns, and engage in symbolic acts of resistance to authority [10]. Besides having the ability to voice their concerns and frustrations about their local communities, digital activism has been successful in connecting Tunisian youth and their local grievances with a larger global political discourse and protest culture [7]. Desrues and Gobe [1] indicate that political participation by the youths in Tunisia is momentary, but Mansouri [6] is of the opinion that the anxieties that have continuously risen regarding the decline in democracy have led to the emergence of new forms of youth activism. Taken together, these findings point to the fact that participation is increasingly issue-based rather than institutionally based.

Moreover, this form of activism is consistent with an emergent worldwide trend of issue-based mobilization, where digital connectedness and flexibility are more important than ideological coherence [29]. Furthermore, current protests by the Tunisian people show that Generation Z activists can now employ online and offline activism to combat socioeconomic exclusion and political marginalization [2].

5.3. Key Drivers

According to Paasonen [10], political action in Tunisia since 2011 has been fomented by the economic marginalization of this generation. Furthermore, [18] states that despite having a university degree, many Tunisian youth who are still unemployed are voicing unhappiness about state institutions. Some scholars argue that such economic instability generates perceptions of relative deprivation and exclusion from national development for Tunisian youth [45]. Yet another argument that young activists have found motivation

to protest in Tunisia has been their need to achieve a solution to their disappointment in politics [6].

Many young people feel that democratic institutions have failed to deliver social justice, accountability, or meaningful political representation since the revolution [19]. Other research shows that youth have taken to engaging in other types of activism away from formal institutional channels due to their lack of trust in political parties and elected officials [1]. The regional disparities between the coastal and interior regions of Tunisia have further increased the antagonism among the marginalized youth communities [28]. Thyen states that rural areas of the nation suffer significant deficits in infrastructure and employment opportunities. This leads to many obstacles to accessing both types of public goods when compared with urban/suburban areas that continue to receive better levels of service from the government [7]. For many young people in Tunisia, this inequality creates a feeling of injustice [10]. Therefore, economic grievances and a lack of political satisfaction have persisted as leading causes for youth mobilization in Tunisia in recent years [5].

5.4. State Response

While Tunisia's government has simultaneously facilitated and limited youth participation in activism since the Arab Spring [6], there was an expansion in the political rights of citizens to demonstrate in the early stages after the revolution, more so than in other North African countries [40]. As instability increased, Tunisia became more inclined toward silencing the voice of protest [8]. Karoui [5] states that the security forces have often employed arrests, surveillance, and police violence against youth protesters participating in demonstrations over unemployment and corruption. Tunisia has experienced escalating measures of authoritarianism that have reduced space in the areas of political resistance and civil society actions [19]. Within the political-opportunity framework, Tunisia's post-2011 trajectory should not be taken as uniformly open. The institutional opening that followed the revolution expanded opportunities for public protest, whereas the concentration of presidential authority after July 2021 and the enforcement of Decree-Law No. 54 narrowed institutional access and increased the risks associated with online criticism [48,49]. While connective action remains an important way to decentralize and issue-specific political communication, visibility through this process can also lead to identification and prosecution [46]. Tunisia therefore demonstrates that digital connectivity can sustain political expression under a contracting opportunity structure without necessarily producing durable institutional influence. Nevertheless, online activism cannot change the disruptive impact it has had on political involvement or long-term involvement in society without effective organizations and actions in society [11].Tunisia thus serves as an ideal example of interaction between democratic transition, economic challenges, and government repression in the formation of the character of contemporary youth activism [1].

6. Case Study: Morocco

6.1. Context

The political system of Morocco can be described as a hybrid of limited democratic institutions and the enduring influence of the monarchy in decision-making processes [39]. In 2011, Morocco introduced constitutional reforms in the wake of the Arab Spring protests to mollify popular discontent but to preserve the monarchy's core power [38]. These reforms, according to scholars, gave an illusion of political liberalization, but did not change the political power balance in the country [42]. Moroccan youth are thus still facing limited spaces for meaningful political participation in the formal institutional structures [1]. The younger generations of Morocco have been increasingly frustrated by persistent social inequality, unemployment, and weak public services [28]. A considerable number of

young Moroccans opine that political parties are somehow ineffective, and thus, critical decisions are still controlled by monarchs [39]. Consequently, the youths are developing an increasingly strong interest in exercising their political participation in the form of protesting, social media pages, and informal civic actions instead of utilizing conventional political organizations [9]. This political regime has provided a small arena of politics in which opposition and dissent can be permitted within the confines of what the state has authorized [38].

6.2. Contemporary Youth Movements

The recent youth protests in Morocco show the increasing importance of digital coordination and decentralized activism within the contemporary youth movements [1]. Moroccan youth activists frequently organize protests, share political information, and mobilize followers outside formal organizations through social media platforms [2]. Digital technologies enable activists to bypass the traditional media structures that are usually closely aligned with the state authorities [29].

The political engagement of Moroccan youth is predominantly around particular socio-economic problems instead of broader ideology [1]. Demonstrations have been organized with a common goal of addressing such things as joblessness, poor educational opportunities, corrupt officials, lack of access to health services, and a lack of social equity for those who have been historically discriminated against [28]. The majority of Moroccan youth groups do not support a centralized leader, and rather favor an informal and horizontally structured organization [29]. Researchers refer to these youth groups as networked forms of activism due to their great reliance on social media and internet-based or symbolic forms of expression [35].

Though decentralization allows for some organizations to experience short-term success, it is still unclear to what extent these types of environments have a positive impact on organizations' long-term survival and capacity to facilitate change [37].

6.3. Key Drivers

Economic exclusion is another key issue behind Moroccan youth activism, as most of the youth who protest live in impoverished areas that are not part of large cities [28]. High rates of youth unemployment are another issue that has contributed to youth frustration in Morocco [18]. Furthermore, there is a lack of employment opportunities for educated youth, which leads to frustration as it creates an impression of social injustice towards the youth [10]. Also, poor service in public facilities such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure has led to protests on a community level in Morocco [39]. The lack of confidence of young Moroccans in formal institutions is also seen as a motivation for young people to seek alternative channels for their political expression [1]. Political parties have not been effective at addressing policy on a national scale and have been one of the reasons why the youth are becoming less likely to participate [42]. In a similar line of reasoning, digital activism has become a method used by young Moroccans to express their demands for transparency and social justice [38]. Increased political awareness and collective identities have also occurred because of exposure to political discourses and cultures through online sources [10]. Finally, in Morocco, youth activism is still fueled by a sense of disengagement and lack of trust in established political systems [2].

6.4. State Response

As far as the regime's reaction to youth mobilization is concerned, it has typically followed a path combining controlled repression with political co-optation [39]. It has usually allowed some degree of protest activity, but without letting it evolve into a large-scale movement against the monarchy [38]. In many cases, state security agencies have

deployed surveillance, arrests, and harassment to deal with activists considered to pose a challenge to the regime's political stability or its monarch [39]. Simultaneously, the selective reforms and symbolic gestures of appeasement have been another tool used by authorities to defuse the feelings of frustration in people and address the demands of the protests [42].

Willis [39] explains that this is a way for the regime to preserve its legitimacy while also preventing structural change. Digital activism in Morocco also occurs in the context of increasing Internet surveillance and state governance over Internet dissent [2]. However, as pointed out by [38], the Moroccan state's strategy for preventing protests and democratic transformation is not necessarily one of repression but of repression plus co-optation. In the Moroccan case, however, the state can cope with social unrest through selective liberalization and authoritarian tactics [1].

In a similar perspective, Morocco's tight institutional closure, limited reform, co-optation and repression create a relatively stable but also a relatively limited political opportunity structure. Digital repression forms part of this structure: activists and journalists have faced prosecution for online expression, while documented spyware attacks demonstrate the risks associated with digital visibility [48,50]. Connective action enables flexible coordination across the party line, while surveillance encourages activists to adopt shorter-lived campaigns, decentralized connections, and to maintain a certain level of discretion concerning their online presence and offline action. Surveillance is not necessarily merely a background condition, but plays a role in forming the range of contentions and can, at least in part, explain a possible public visibility of digital mobilization without institutional change.

7. Key Findings

The data suggest that contemporary youth movements are mostly less ideological and more pragmatic than previous iterations of political activism by traditional political parties and revolutionary organizations [39]. Today's youth activism in the two countries is centered on tangible socio-economic issues such as unemployment, inequality, corruption, and deficiencies in public services instead of comprehensive ideological programs [5]. Digital tools are central to enabling mobilization, communication, and identity formation among youth activists in Tunisia and Morocco [39]. Table 1 shows the key similarities and differences between Tunisia and Morocco across five analytical dimensions.

Table 1. Structured cross-case comparison.

Analytical Dimension	Tunisia	Morocco	Comparative Inference
Socio-economic grievances	Unemployment, regional inequality, corruption, and frustration with the limited socio-economic outcomes of the revolution	Unemployment, inequality, deficient public services, corruption, and limited socio-economic inclusion	Similar grievances exist in both cases and cannot independently explain differences in mobilization or outcomes.
Political opportunity structure	Expanded political opportunities after 2011, followed by substantial contraction after the concentration of presidential authority in 2021	Consistently restricted institutional access within a monarchy-centered political system	Tunisia demonstrates significant change over time, whereas Morocco displays more stable but consistently narrow political opportunities.
State response	Initial political opening followed by increasing restrictions, arrests, surveillance, and prosecution of online criticism	Controlled tolerance combined with surveillance, arrests, selective repression, reform, and co-optation	Both states combine accommodation and control, but the timing and institutional form differ.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Analytical Dimension	Tunisia	Morocco	Comparative Inference
Digital repertoire	Decentralized, issue-specific communication connecting online expression with episodic offline protest	Informal digital networks, cyberactivism, and issue-specific campaigns operating outside formal party structures	Connective action appears in both cases, but digital visibility also increases exposure to monitoring and sanctions.
Political outcomes	Expanded possibilities for expression after 2011, followed by limited durable influence under democratic regression	Public visibility and localized mobilization, but limited capacity to produce structural political change	Digital mobilization expands participation more readily than it produces sustained institutional influence.

The comparison shows that the most important feature that distinguishes the two cases is not the presence of grievances or the use of digital communication, since both are indeed present in Tunisia and Morocco. The difference lies in how political institutions and state-control strategies condition the conversion of discontent and digital visibility into sustained collective action. Tunisia represents a trajectory of an opportunity structure that first expanded and then contracted, while Morocco represents a fairly stable set of narrow opportunities resulting from selective reform, co-optation, surveillance, and repression.

The findings revealed that social media sites help people to promote social change without a conventional hierarchical leadership framework. Rather, these platforms are based on decentralized and adaptive organizational principles [1]. Furthermore, comparative data suggest that political context is an important factor in the effectiveness of youth mobilization in both countries [39]. For example, Tunisia's relatively free but tumultuous regime offers relatively more potential for public protest, but also gives rise to additional levels of risk from repressive governments and the possibility of regressions in democracy [1]. By contrast, Morocco's tightly controlled political setting, limited reforms, pervasive surveillance, and various forms of co-optation [38] have not permitted many options for activism. Thus, these findings suggest that young activism in North Africa reflects global transformations in digital political participation as well as local socio-political constraints affecting youth mobilization [1].

8. Discussion

Collectively, the results are best understood by adopting a conditional approach to digitally mediated youth activism. Connective action accounts for the generalized pattern of personalized communication, horizontal coordination, and participation in issues in Tunisia and Morocco, while political opportunity structure accounts for differentials in institutional access, political risk, and potential influence. Relative deprivation operates within this explanation as a grievance mechanism: unemployment, inequality, and institutional distrust create motivations for participation, but they do not independently determine whether mobilization can be sustained or converted into political influence. Digital platforms can increase participation and public visibility, but political outcomes depend upon organizational longevity, institutional access, state reactions and exposure to surveillance.

Contemporary youth activism in Tunisia and Morocco, among other places, represents a transition towards more decentralized and more issues-based mobilization through an increased use of digital technology for politics and social movements in general [29], in contrast to previous generations, where the majority were affiliated with political parties and movements that were ideologically inspired. Contemporary youth activists are increasingly engaging with politics through non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic modes of political participation [8], with social media being used to facilitate political communication and symbolism in addition to being the foundation of the movement [37]. While

digital political activity makes mobilizing around specific socio-economic issues easier for youth by lowering the barriers to entry to political participation [2], questions remain as to whether the movements can maintain any organizational strength in the long term and how effective any political participation based only on digital technology might be without any institutional backing [37]. Similarly, the post-revolutionary instability that Tunisia has faced suggests that a democratization process alone does not result in socio-economic change [6], and Morocco's political system shows that in semi-authoritarian and authoritarian regimes, there is room for certain kinds of dissent within certain limits but not for substantial political change or political liberalization [39]. In both cases, this results in continued socio-economic problems, unemployment, inequality, lack of accountability, and marginalization, among others, which limit the impact of youth activism [28]. As such, Gen Z activism in the two countries—and others—has reinvigorated political participation in North Africa and created alternatives that are based on the politics of protest and social movements as spaces outside of traditional institutions of political participation [1]. However, there are many ongoing discussions as to how digital technology and the youth's focus on socio-economic justice interact with the region's continuing political authoritarianism [5].

9. Conclusions

In Tunisia and Morocco, the activism of Generation Z reflects a transformation in how young people politically participate in North Africa. Generation Z activists are less affiliated with traditional political parties or ideological movements than their predecessors were at this same time period, and they are instead relying on decentralized, issue-driven, and digital methods of mobilizing themselves through social media and other online platforms. Social media and digital communication technologies have become powerful tools for organizing protests, disseminating political consciousness, and creating collective identities among the youth of both countries.

It was also found that in Tunisia and Morocco, socio-economic grievances—in particular, unemployment, inequality, corruption, and political marginalization—are the main causes of youth activism. Despite the differences in their political patterns and models, youth in both countries expressed high levels of mistrust towards formal political institutions, indicating a growing trend towards engaging in alternative ways of participation that lay outside the realms of mainstream electoral aspects. In Tunisia, the relatively open yet fragile political landscape offered a broader range of protest, and in Morocco, the hybrid nature of the political system introduced stricter measures, as the political system was characterized by a series of limited forms of reforms, spying, and selective repression. Another observation made in the study was the fact that digital activism has helped the youth movements to connect localized agendas with transnational political discourses and cultures of protest around the world. The study, however, also supports the conclusion that no level of online activism is sufficient to reach stable political change without the support of organizational structures and offline collective action. Youth mobilization effectiveness remains to be determined by structural limitations, responses of the state, and economic conditions. Future studies must thus consider the political and societal effects of Generation Z activism in the long term, the growing relevance of transnational digital networks in contextualizing youth movements, and the effects of gender dynamics of participation, leadership, and representation within current youth activism in North Africa.

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