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Political Participation by University Students:
Creating a Democratic Generation

Abstract

Youth democratic involvement in Jordan is an increasingly important issue. As Jordan is still growing and evolving in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Jordanian government has begun to show increasing interest in youth participation in national political debate. This is evident from certain government actions and policies meant to encourage youth involvement in democratic practices. This article presents recommendations that could strengthen, and positively impact, such democratic involvement by educating young Jordanians on democratic processes from a young age, allowing university students to actively participate in university-level decision making, and increasing student involvement in democratic action through structured workshops.

Introduction

In this essay, I will argue that the Jordanian government needs to take more serious steps towards involving university students in the country's political reform by (A) educating Jordanians about democratic processes from a very young age in order for the next generation to be better prepared and more closely involved in the practice of democracy, (B) allowing university students in Jordan to contribute to the decision making process of their universities, by taking feedback from student clubs and associations more seriously, and (C) Holding workshops on leadership, diversity, and tolerance, to promote understanding and unity inside the student community, leading to greater student democratic involvement.

Jordan is undoubtedly a country facing many challenges with regard to public participation in the decision-making process. According to the UNDP (United Nations Development

Programme[1]), Jordan's 2013 parliamentary elections that took place on the 23rd of January were the country's first elections post the extraordinary new developments that shook the region. Voter turnout was 56% of registered voters (42% of eligible voters). The result was that only 3 of the 18 registered political parties came to be represented in Parliament with very little youth involvement. The quota for women increased from 20 to 25 per cent in municipalities, while female representation in Parliament remained at 9.8 %.

At present Jordan's population is characterized by its relatively high percentage of youth. According to Euro-Mediterranean Youth Platform, an entity that aims to bring NGOs from the European and Mediterranean regions together[2], in 2008, an estimated 37% of the population was under the age of 15 and 58% under the age of 25. The total number of young people in the age group 15-24 has grown more than 10-fold since 1950 and is projected to reach 1.4 million in 2020, which is the equivalent of 18.2 percent of Jordan's total population. The continuing sharp rise in Jordan's young population is making it exceedingly clear that they cannot be marginalized any longer and the time has come for Jordanian youth to play a greater and more emphatic role in the decision-making processes of the country – a role that would empower them to determine the path of their own future.

Educating Jordanians about Democratic Processes: An Early Start

There is a clear relationship between political participation and education, each complements the other. The interconnectedness has, in fact, received considerable attention from political scientists, "The uneducated man, or the man with limited education, is a different political actor from the man who has achieved a higher level of education" (Almond, 1989, p. 315). Under Jordan's present political scenario, democratic values need to be imbibed in society from a young age if youth are to get more involved politically, discuss their opinions, and create political dialogue as young adults in Jordan. This is where the role of education becomes imperative, because only the formal education system in Jordan has the reach and capacity to

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[1] http://www.undp.org/content/jordan/en/home/ourwork/democraticgovernance/in_depth/
[2] http://www.euromedp.org

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teach the young what democracy means at the local, regional and national levels, and what its advantages could be.

However, before starting to discuss the education system in Jordan, let us first briefly touch upon democracy in Jordan. According to Freedom House[3], Jordan's state in 2013 is not free, and for political rights Jordan scores a dismal 6 with 7 being 'worst'. Thus, it seems, in general, that lack of freedoms or, to express it differently, the right to limited liberties, make Jordan a less than democratic country although it is admittedly on the road to becoming one.

For the purpose of this paper I would like to focus on how school curriculums are written in Jordan. When it comes to school curriculums in formal education, teaching democracy is not something new. For example, John Dewey, an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, put forward many groundbreaking and influential ideas on education and social reform from as early as the 1900's (Rayan, 1997, P32). Dewey's book, "Democracy and Education", was one of the most influential contributions of his time, and continues to be debated and referred to in the present times. In order to say if the curriculum is democratic or not, there are many indicators mentioned and used by many authors and education reformers around the world. A study called "School's Curriculum and Civic Education for Building Democratic Citizens" published in 2013 says on page 7, and I quote, "People educated to commit themselves to community, to an open-minded society, to solidarity, and to social equity is what democracy needs (Dahrendorf 2003). Such people will recognize that only democracy can offer them framework conditions for a stable, social and liberal society".

An interesting example can be seen in Parker, W. C., & Jarolimek, J. (1984) Citizenship and the Critical Role of Social Studies, regarding curriculum, where it has been concluded that curriculum must be based on three main dimensions. The general dimensions along with the context of categories presented have been detailed as follows:

Knowledge	Effective area	Skills

Political	Values	General skills
Social	Attitudes	Participation skills
Cultural	Dispositions	
Economic		
forms of participation		

In Jordan there is an Office of Curriculum Management at the Ministry of Education. The former Head of Education in Ramtha, Mr. Abdullah Faleh Al Omari, when contacted, provided the following basic information regarding how school curriculums are written and developed: The Ministry of Education chooses a committee called (Outcome Committee or in Arabic لجنة صياغة النتاجات), that sets a plan of what the lessons should consist of (a list of topics). The lists of topics covering different subjects are then given to a number of authors (also selected by the Ministry of Education, but no information is available to the general public on how this selection is made) to write the text book. Once the content is written, it is rechecked for grammatical or other errors, after which the book is approved and goes into print.

The approach for producing text book material therefore appears simplistic and not built on any kind of assessable , survey, methodology, or system in terms of the manner in which it is written or produced, leave alone taught.

Also a local Biology teacher, Mrs. Haya Al Smadi, who was formerly a contributing author of biology curriculum books of the 9th grade, confirmed that topics were just given to teachers to write about, without any reference points, guidance, or methods to consult when writing the curriculum.

Student Participation in University-level Decision Making:

At the university level in Jordan, student clubs are under the direct supervision of the Student's Affairs Deanship. According to university regulations, the main goal of student clubs is to encourage voluntary work, support and develop hobbies, and allow foreign students to share their culture and interests with local students. In almost all universities in Jordan

political activity in student clubs is strictly prohibited (M. Hussainy, 2012, p.5). Also with regard to student representation in the university clubs across Jordanian universities, there are very few differences. In fact they all are very similar in terms of seat numbers per faculty and so on. For example, at the University of Jordan student representation depends on the number of departments in every faculty, with every department represented by one seat as long as the number of seats is not less than three. The participation and voting processes thus seem weak and flawed.

However, of more concern than a flawed voting and participation system is the fact that no university in Jordan takes into consideration the opinions of its students in the decision-making process - even with decisions that directly impact the students through their university life and even when a university has a relatively high number of students (37000 at the University of Jordan), many of whom are potentially Jordan's future leaders.

Looking through a random selection of 'Student Services' pages on different university websites around the world, I found many examples of student involvement in the decision making process by collecting feedback from questionnaires, reports, surveys, and so on. For example at Oxford University, a student automatically becomes a member of the Oxford University Student Union (OUSU), which is a "democratic, student led and independent organization", according to their website[4]. The OUSU supports a student's life at the university, and helps students take part in shaping their own school experiences. The University of Oxford also undertakes a number of surveys to insure that students are getting an opportunity to better their experiences, and students' views are used as a guide by faculty members, colleges, and departments, when decisions are taken on processes and activities that impact students.

According to Ms. Veronica Muoio, a former student of Middlebury College[5], the democratic culture at her institution underpinned not only student-administration relationships, but also student-student connections. In addition to regular student debates between groups such as

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[4] http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/living/clubs/
[5] A small liberal arts school in Vermont, USA,
http://www.middlebury.edu/newsroom/archive/524638/node/459563

the College Republicans and the College Democrats, every club had to go before a panel of peers to apply for a budget and receive special funding for events. This panel was made up of other students and used external criteria in order to evaluate the applications it was presented with. "The administration truly responded to the concerns voiced by students who initiated the divestment movement" she said. An environmental group on campus brought to light the fact that the college's endowment was being invested in fossil fuels. This group rallied student and professors to call for divestment from these environmentally-damaging stocks, and the administration responded by hosting a series of public meetings and allowing students to present their case to the board of trustees. Ultimately, although the board decided it was impractical to divest from these particular stocks, the experience of debate and attempts to take action strengthened the respectful relationship between students, teachers, and all those who participated in the movement.

Increasing Student involvement in Democratic Action:

What is meant here by student involvement is simply "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 518). Student clubs, sport teams, and associations are all different kinds of student involvement, but I believe that in Jordan these clubs do not fully exploit the students' potential because universities do not offer them the opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, creativity, social consciousness, and personal and collective responsibility. Even if, in some rare instances they do, students are not given the opportunity to use those skills in a manner that affects their life experiences at schools and makes them feel that their participation has had positive outcomes. As a result, students feel increasingly frustrated because either they lack opportunities to learn new skills, or (if they do learn them) lack the freedom to fully use their skills and abilities.

Increasing cases of university violence are a fairly new phenomenon, and seem to be a direct result of the "narrow loyalties and affiliations" (M. Hussainy, 2012, p.10) within the election system of the student councils, caused by the lack of tolerance and mutual respect. The lack of tolerance is actually a lack of wider understanding and empathy, because students have had

little exposure to the concept of diversity and skills that develop a sense of social responsibility. The African term, 'Ubuntu' perhaps best describes what seems to be woefully lacking on our youth's consciousness. 'Ubuntu' is a single word for, "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity". (Ubuntu 11.04 Classic Desktop Guide, 2011)

This 'bond of sharing' needs to be consciously taught. "Interactions with diverse peers, participation in diversity-related courses, and activities inside and outside residence halls inspire students to challenge their own prejudices and promote inclusion and social justice" (Zuniga, X., Williams, E. A., & Berger, J. B., (2005), P. 660). Diversity workshops and intergroup dialogue training allow students to learn how to participate effectively and positively.

When the students are not "taught" how to lead, they simply will not be able to. If they are not "taught" how to be tolerant they simply will not be able to. When there is a lack of deserving and/or qualified leaders among the students standing for elections, when there are no voters who understand the responsibility of casting a vote, and when there is no university management that allows or considers student needs and viewpoints when taking decisions, the result is an election without real empowerment or substance, an "illusion" of democracy.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to propose solutions and not to focus on problems. If we are to address the interest of the Jordanian government in engaging youth in political dialogue, then the fact that this is a 'taught' skill cannot be overemphasized. For dialogue to become a natural part of the social and political fabric, the right atmosphere needs to be created from a very early age, for the youth to learn to be open-minded and accepting in their approach. More importantly, their voices need to be heard, and respected. Education, therefore, lays the most important foundation of any skill to be learned and developed because it is this that moulds an individual's thinking, ethics, discernment, and creativity at an impressionable age. Democracy and education are therefore not only interrelated and interdependent but also invaluable for the creation and sustenance of a thriving, healthy socio-political fabric in Jordan.

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