

The Youth Movement and its Activists

by Mareike Transfeld

SUMMARY

The youth movement and its activists exist. But, in terms of its abilities and influence, the movement was blown out of proportions by the narrative in local and international media.

The term 'youth' no longer refers to an age range. It now represents anyone whose mindset is to demand the establishment of a civil state.

While youth activists had a critical stance toward political parties in the 2011 protests, nearly 40% of them agree with youth participation in political parties.

The greatest challenge youth activists face is their lack of organization, which can be explained by a lack of experience, political differences, and individualism.

This policy brief was written as part of the EU-funded Civil Society Forum project. The project aims at establishing networks of civil society organizations (CSOs) and youth activists. This brief is based on data collected in a survey among implemented among youth activists in 2012 and makes recommendations to CSOs as well as donor organizations.

The role of the youth during the 2011 uprising

The Independent Youth Movement (YM) was the engine of the 2011 uprisings in Yemen. With the help of online forums such as Facebook, individual independent activists organized the first anti-regime protests in Sana'a and helped to get the protests going. But more important than their activism as such, was what they stood for – the creation of a civil state. By the general population, as well as local and international media the youth movement was perceived as being the only independent force on the square, pursuing genuine political change. While the youth movement was seen as having the improvement of the country in their interest, the oppositional parties present at the squares were associated with the old system. It is this discourse, which turned the youth movement into a driver of the protests. On the one hand, in terms of its abilities and influence, this movement was blown out of proportion in the discourse. On the other hand, youth activists and revolutionary youth coalitions continue to exist and remain active.

After the GCC Initiative had brought about a settlement among the political elite, the youth movement lost much of its leverage within the political process. Its influence was limited to their participation in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). While a number of them participated in the NDC, others remained active by establishing or becoming active in new political parties (i.e. the Al-Watan Party and Justice and Building Party).

Others remained active within civil society organizations (CSOs). Many activists simply returned to their everyday lives. Regrettably, after the protests ended with the signing of the GCC Initiative, the youths have received little media attention, thus little is known about these activists and their activism.

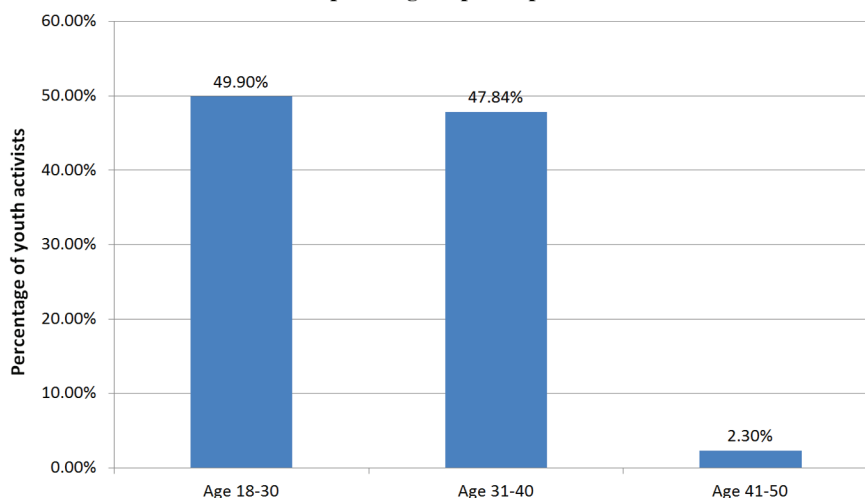
The youth movement and its activists

The 2011 uprising in Yemen became locally known as the ‘youth revolution’. This is due to the role that they played. However, in 2011 the meaning of the term ‘youth’ or shabab in Arabic, in the Yemeni context has undergone significant changes. Rather than just referring to an age range, the term describes a mindset. It refers to a broad range of people that demanded the immediate overthrow of the Saleh regime and called for political and economic reforms. Perhaps most importantly, they called for the creation of a civil state that was to be ruled by civilians rather than the current military-tribal elite.

In contrast to the Egyptian uprising of 2011 where in the discourse the distinctions were made between i.e. workers, doctors, Christians or Muslim Brothers, everyone who was present at the protest squares all around Yemen was referred to as ‘youth’. Exceptions to this were tribesmen and soldiers. Nonetheless, it was in no way odd to refer to a forty year old taxi driver as a youth.

This new meaning became evident in a survey conducted among youth activists in August 2012 by the Yemen Poling Center (YPC). It becomes clear that most of the interviewed activists do not qualify as youth when taking the definition of the United Nations (15 to 24 years old). The majority of the interviewed activists were much older.

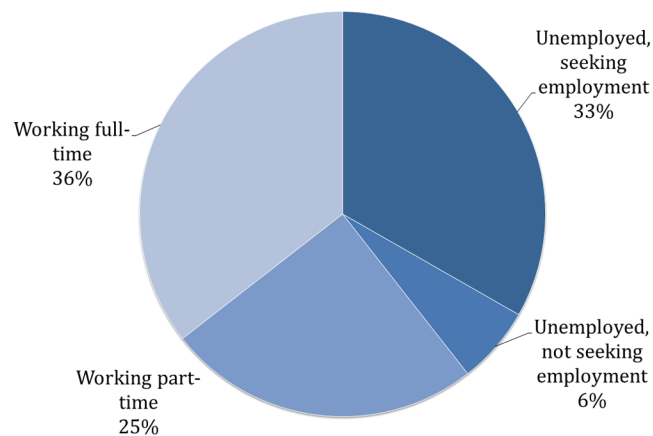
Graph 1: Age of participants



The fact that 86% of the interviewees were male suggests that men dominated the movement. Youth activists also appear to be highly educated, with 46% holding a university degree - a statistic that is significantly above the national average.

Furthermore, the majority of the interviewed activists were employed. One-third were employed on a full-time basis. 25% had part-time jobs. One-third was unemployed and seeking employment. This number is just below the national average, which is estimated to be between 40% and 50%.

Graph: Employment situation of youths?



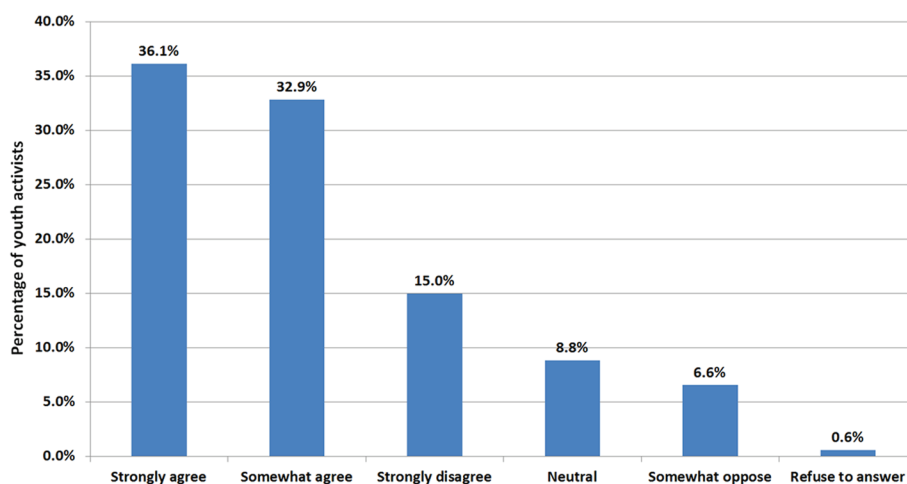
Youth activists and political parties

Youth activists of the revolutionary coalitions are not new to political activism. 77% of them stated that they were active before the 2011 protests. The majority was active within political parties.

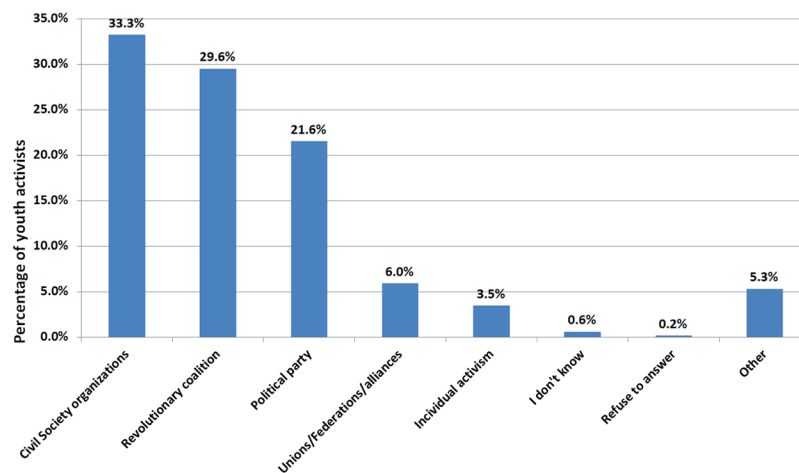
Given that the general attitude among activists toward the traditional powers is not very positive, these figures are a bit surprising. Roughly a third of the questioned activists claimed to be a member of a political party. 70% of them were members of the Islamic Islah Party.

A third of the activists strongly agreed with idea that youth should participate in existing political parties. This is certainly due to the fact that the political parties, as opposed to CSOs, have more influence on political processes. However, when asked about what the best frameworks for youth activism are, their reply was CSOs. In contrast to state institutions and existing political parties, youth activists believe that CSOs respect democratic principles the most.

Graph 19: To what degree do you agree with the participation of youths in party activity?



Graph 6: From your point of view what is the best framework for your activity and for young people like you?



Youth activists see their future within both CSOs and political parties, albeit to a lesser extent within the latter. It is also interesting that they have a high level of interaction with CSOs as many of them have attended their training workshops and conferences. In fact, many activists who attend these workshops tend to list them on their Curriculum Vitae. This suggests that they see them to be a part of their personal career development. In other words, these workshops are seen as opportunities for progress in their professional lives. In this regard, political activism can be seen as both a profession and career choice. In fact, youth activists will simply identify themselves as activists on their business cards.

Youth activists: quo vadis?

Though activists have a high level of enthusiasm and ambition, they have some significant weaknesses. For example, since their goals are often quite broad (i.e. to complete the goals of the youth revolution, build a civil state, remove the traditional elite from power), they struggle to obtain a clear direction for their work. Facing this fact is one of their greatest challenges.

Another challenge is their lack of organization. On a general level, they lack the ability to effectively organize groups on an institutional level. Key to this is the need to introduce mechanisms that help them make decisions and split responsibilities amongst their members. Besides the lack of experience, these problems are a result of individualism, which came as a consequence of the empowerment that they experienced after the 2011 protests. Creating order and structure becomes particularly difficult when various political attitudes exist within a single group. Just as is the case on the national level, political differences that exist on the macro level are often hard to overcome on the micro level.

These differences prevent various groups from forming effective networks and pressure groups. Sadly, there is a sense among the individual groups that they are in competition with each other, especially over the various opportunities provided by CSOs and international donor organizations.

Recommendations:

- Enhance the youth activist's ability to organize themselves.
 - Youth leaders should receive training opportunities that help them learn about different forms of organization..
 - Trainings should emphasize organizational forms that require less financial resources.
 - The youth should be taught how to mobilize people under the rubric of shared values and common goals rather than through financial incentives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT YPC

The Yemen Polling Center (YPC), with its unparalleled experience and expertise, sets the highest professional standards for public opinion, market, and social science research and analysis. At the forefront of social science research, YPC partners with local and international organizations to research and advise on Yemen's most pressing issues.

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- Enhance the youth activist's ability to form networks.
 - Projects focusing on the empowerment of youth activists should have the goal of establishing a network of similar minded activists and organizations.
 - Calls for project proposals that focus on empowering youth activists should require a number of youth organizations to cooperate together. This will limit the competition, and enhance cooperation, amongst activists and organizations.
- Assistance should be directed towards one of two types of complementary projects. Both projects that enable youth participation in existing CSOs and political parties, and/or projects that help establish new youth CSOs and political parties, should be supported.
 - International donors and CSOs should focus on helping youth participate more effectively in existing political parties. Facilitating party conferences with both its youth members and leadership present can do this.
 - Active youth from various political parties and regions, including worldwide, should be brought together in ways that help them exchange ideas and learn from each other, especially in areas related to how they engage in their respective political parties.
 - Previously existing and new CSOs established by youths of the "Independent Youth Movement" should be supported.

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