



Human Rights and Freedom of Expression and Youth Political Participation

GenG - New Generation Program

Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Briefs Series

Policy Brief -3

Introduction

This policy brief focuses on the link between respect for human rights, freedom of expression, political participation, democratic participation in political parties, institutions, and civil society organizations, and social and civic spaces.

The brief is an output of the Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Labs, conducted by the Arab Renaissance and Democracy (ARDD) in partnership with the Center for Strategic

Studies at the University of Jordan, as part of the New Generation Program. It highlights the third session of the lab that addressed Human Rights, Freedom of Expression, and Youth Political Participation, and what twenty political science and law students from the University of Jordan discussed in this regard. Following the labs' work methodology, the session hosted legal consultant Adv. Rami Qweider and moderated by human rights expert Dr. Riyad Sobh.

Factors That Affect Freedom of Expression Spaces

Ensuring freedom of expression is a fundamental step in the participation process, as it allows people to engage with and affect public affairs. At the same time, it also allows policies and politics to be shaped around people's lives and everyday experiences. **This Policy Lab opened a space for the participants to discuss these connections and explore how freedom of expression, human rights, and political and civic participation are connected and intertwined.**

People's engagement in public and political life depends on their possibility of expressing opinions, ideas, and needs within their communities. Expressing and sharing thoughts and practices to achieve goals is a sign of democratic collective life, diversity, and inclusion. It is an indicator of respect for fundamental human rights, shared responsibility, and societal accountability. Ensuring freedom

of expression enables a cultural environment that encompasses a set of values and tools essential for individuals' active engagement in political life in pursuit of the common good. This necessitates a political-legal framework that guarantees freedom of expression and opinion, alongside regulations governing individuals' participation.

The laboratory emphasized the necessity of providing several specific objective conditions and factors to stimulate democratic political participation, including cultural, economic, social, and political aspects. The relationship between political and civic participation, human rights, and freedom of expression is complex and influenced by multiple factors that extend beyond legislative matters and encompass the economic conditions of people, their technological access, and digital inclusion. Access to information is not evenly distributed both in quantitative and qualitative terms, and it widely depends on the material and immaterial resources that people have and which allow them to seek, access, and produce information.

The Lab discussed these factors as follows:

1st Factor: Human Rights

Human Rights have gradually become a universal reference across the globe in the past decades, as they have been formulated and achieved in different forms and measures across different contexts through political action and mobilization. In this sense, and despite their universal aspiration, they are not equally practiced or respected worldwide, several dynamics influence their achievement. Among the most fundamental human rights, freedom of expression and opinion is particularly telling not only of the guarantee of individual well-being but also of democratic and inclusive collective life.

Human rights as such, and the body of law affirming them, properly developed after WWII, and affirmed that:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”
(Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Contemporary human rights have been conceived of as a tool to ensure peace and stability for all societies and peoples, aiming to avoid and prevent the repetition of disastrous wars and to ensure a dignified life for all people across the planet. However, in time, their adoption across the globe has increasingly shown that it is within the actions, mobilizations and needs of people that human rights are defined, achieved, and practiced. In this sense, human rights always interact with social, economic, and political factors in each context. While they aim to ensure political and civic rights, among others, they also profoundly depend on the exercise of such rights by people through political and civic participation. They allow for wider political engagement and complexity, and they depend on the political action of peoples and governments.

A report produced by the High Commissioner for Human Rights in the 27th session of the Human Rights Council in 2014 underlines, in fact, the strong connection between specific human rights such as freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, as well as the rights to information and, and equal political participation.

Jordan is a party to many international conventions and treaties upholding human rights. Despite that, the most recent Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports have expressed some concerns regarding freedoms and rights in the country. HRW has thus recommended that Jordan makes further efforts in pursuit of guaranteeing human rights, democracy, and equal citizenship. These elements are fundamental to enhancing participation. When laws and institutions protect the citizens' rights and well-being, they enhance and promote equal and inclusive participation in civic and political life, both in the public and private arenas.

Article 7 of the Jordanian Constitution explicitly affirms the inviolability of personal freedom and stipulates in Article 15 its guarantee of freedom of opinion and expression. Jordan has demonstrated over the last decades its commitment to safeguarding human rights in general by implementing a range of national strategies and plans. Within this institutional framework, the Jordanian government actively promotes and supports human rights and fundamental freedoms through a network of official bodies, including the Government Coordinator's Office for Human Rights, operating under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Office and the National Center for Human Rights.

2nd Factor: Social Media and Digital Space

Freedom of expression is a central tenet of any context where people aim to participate in bringing about change and fulfilling their needs and aspirations. However, this freedom is determined by the laws in place, the access of people to means of information, their ability and possibilities of sharing their ideas, and the availability and accessibility of technologies. The Policy Lab has been able to capture in advance some important dynamics in the Jordanian context concerning the question of freedom of expression and digital spaces and platforms, as well as the relationship of youth with social media and how they express their opinions and ideas on it. Participants in the Lab discussed the threats to freedom of expression in cyberspace well before the passing of the Cybercrime Law later in 2023. Although, Royal Committee had also stated that “modernizing the media and ensuring their independence is crucial for political modernization” and that “it is inconceivable to develop a democratic model without free and responsible media and the free flow of information”.

As discussed in the 2021 baseline study, conducted at the beginning of the Gen-G's project in Jordan to understand the needs of youth in context, Jordanian youth widely rely on social media, but, at the same time, they are not satisfied with the information available on such platforms. In their reliance on this kind of media, they fit wider trends in society and face similar challenges.

Social media has gained an increasingly big role in how opinions and information are expressed and exchanged, as 75% of adults in Jordan have accounts with the sites Facebook and Twitter. Access to the internet, however, is not even, and it depends on social and economic status, gender, and geography. Imposing taxes on mobile internet services, for example, is an official barrier to accessing electronic services for many, especially for individuals with low incomes. The Department of Statistics conducted a study in 2017 on people's ability to use the Internet, and 10.5% of respondents cited high Internet costs as one of the main reasons for not using it. The cost was a more significant hindrance in rural areas, where 17.3% of the population does not have access to the internet due to service costs, compared to 9.5% in urban areas.

These factors show the limits faced by youth, and the general population, in their ability and possibilities to express opinions and access information through digital platforms. Freedom of expression does not only highly depend on creativity and innovation, but is also impacted by contextual challenges and the censorship enacted by social media platforms themselves, which are often entangled in political and economic agreements with powerful governments. Not only are these platforms often characterized by the dissemination of fake or incorrect news and information, but they also often actively censor users, as well as breach privacy rules. Meta's platforms (Facebook and Instagram), for example, have consistently demonstrated a pattern of censoring pro-Palestine content, particularly during periods of increased Israeli violence, when users seek to shed light on Israel's violations against the Palestinian population by sharing news and information. This censorship has spurred discussions among young people in various regions, such as Palestine and Jordan, about their digital rights and the issues surrounding access to and freedom on these platforms.

3rd Factor: Ensuring the Right to Access Information

The public's right to knowledge and access to information is one of the key pillars of democratic governance in nations. Effective citizen participation relies on information, which serves as a crucial tool for promoting citizenship, transparency, and accountability.

This principle has been underscored within the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 16), which affirm the right of all individuals to seek, receive, and impart information, enabling individuals to make informed decisions and engage meaningfully in public affairs. Moreover, the right to access information ensures that individuals living in any society can obtain sufficient knowledge from the governing authorities. Therefore, institutions and relevant entities must proactively disseminate the maximum amount of information across all platforms, especially digital ones that are easily accessible via the Internet.

The Jordanian Access to Information Law was enacted in 2007, allowing citizens to officially obtain information. Article 7 of the law affirms that “every Jordanian has the right to access information requested according to the provisions of this law if he has a legitimate interest or reason to do so”. When the law was first passed, it was the first of its kind in the Arab world. However, since its enactment, the law has faced widespread criticism, with many local organizations considering it as only formal and not applied in practice, particularly due to its requirement of a legitimate interest or reason to access information. A report by the International Transparency Foundation - Jordan in 2020 highlighted the law’s inconsistency with United Nations principles in this regard. The report pointed out that the law contradicts approximately 40 other laws that stipulate information confidentiality. The World Right to Information Rating report issued by The Centre for Law and Democracy labeled the Jordanian law as ambiguous and lacking procedural details, with a vague exemption system.

In the year 2024, Amended Law No. (3) of 2024 was issued and is read with Law No. (47) of 2007, pursuant to which many measures were taken. The law required the department to publish annual or periodic reports, projects, tenders, etc., issued by the concerned departments, and agreements related to the work of the department. Under the law, information that has been published, disclosed, or delivered to the requester may be used or reused by the relevant authorities, provided that the date and source of its acquisition are indicated, and its content is not distorted by the provisions of the document indexing and classification system issued following the provisions of the law, a person competent to receive and follow up on requests for information is provided. The law requires the responsible person to respond to or reject the request for information within fifteen working days from the day following the date of its submission. This period may be extended to another ten days, once only, and for justified reasons. The law stipulates that if the request is rejected, the decision must be justified and reasoned while refraining from responding within the specified period is considered a decision of rejection, among other fundamental amendments.

These data, and the youth’s concerns emphasizing the connections between freedom of expression and their political participation, point to the need for Jordan to make significant efforts in ensuring freedom of expression and free access to information. **These factors influence efforts to enhance political participation because they enable an environment that offers people the social and cultural elements that empower them to formulate their needs and aspirations and act towards them collectively and effectively. The freedom to express ideas and opinions impacts how policies are formulated.** Furthermore, it is also highly linked to

building collective political work in different spaces: from parties to media to civil society. Jordan’s efforts to modernize political life and strengthen parties and political participation since 2021 would benefit from greater attention from lawmakers, civil society, and the government. All these stakeholders should work on the question of guaranteeing and safeguarding freedom of expression, which would ultimately lead to increased participation, trust, and a stronger social contract.

From a Youth Perspective: Freedom of Expression Reality in Jordan Needs More Work

Jordan’s position in the 2022 Global Democracy Index, witnessed a substantial decline, placing it among the top ten countries experiencing the most significant setbacks worldwide. Jordan’s global ranking currently stands at 122nd with an eighth-place ranking in the Arab region. Furthermore, the report underscores the persistent decline across the Middle East and North Africa region in the Democracy Index, reinforcing the region’s status as one of the lowest performers in terms of human rights compared to other global regions. For example, Jordan’s classification shifted from “Partly Free” to “Not Free” in the Freedom House Global Freedom Index from 2021 to the latest report in 2023. Regarding press freedom, the “Reporters Without Borders” report in 2023 stated that the Middle East region “continues to suffer from a lack of press freedom.” In the case of Jordan, the report affirmed that “the Jordanian press finds itself caught between self-censorship and red lines drawn by the authorities.” Jordan’s ranking in the 2023 edition of this index is therefore very low, 146 out of 180 countries, compared to 120 in 2022.

Within such context, the enactment of the Cybercrime Law in 2023 has brought a big debate in Jordanian society. This law was accompanied by local protests by parliamentarians, human rights activists, and civil society organizations. The new law has also faced criticism from various international entities, including the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States, as well as international organizations such as the Mediterranean Observatory for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch.

“Fear of legal prosecution can affect young people’s participation in political and civic life, as young people may feel concerned about the potential consequences of expressing their opinions and participating in public debates.”

- Lab Participant

Youths participating in the Policy Lab have widely discussed both the positive and negative factors impacting freedom of expression in Jordan, highlighting not only legislative matters but also cultural, economic, and social issues. While many appreciated the constitutional protection of freedom of expression and human rights, they also recognized limiting and restrictive legislation that often hinders youth from freely sharing their ideas and opinions. This was seen, by some of them, as producing negative effects not only on freedoms but also on overall youth political participation.

These perceptions align with the findings of the **GenG report of 2022** and with youth perceptions of their role and access to political participation and civil society.

“The media plays an important role in highlighting social and political issues and promoting freedom of opinion and expression.”

- Lab Participant

On the other hand, during the Policy Lab discussion youths also focused on other issues impacting freedom of expression and participation, such as online harassment, the dissemination of fake news, and public security, which they considered as intertwined matters. At the same time, they also underlined that they felt social media was an important tool for them but was not used to its full potential.

The role of media in general, both traditional and new, and the civic space was seen as crucial in improving freedom of expression (both by raising awareness about it and practicing it) and in supporting youth political participation as a consequence.

While another also stated that:

“There are independent and active media outlets and civil society organizations working to promote freedom and democracy.”

- Lab Participant

Recommendations

To Government:

- Work on aligning policies and practices to adhere to Jordan’s commitments to human rights charters and ensuring freedom of opinion and expression.
- Reduce electronic surveillance on content related to societal trends, with particular emphasis on the political and civil participation of young people.

To Parliament:

- Initiate dialogues concerning restrictive laws on freedom of opinion and expression, including those related to cyber-crimes. Raise awareness about their impacts and the procedures within these laws, ensuring the involvement of young people in their formulation and acceptance or rejection.
- Modify the Access to Information Law to facilitate access to public information.
- Review the Cybercrime Law.

To Universities and Academics:

- Conduct research on freedom of expression, exploring its role and impact on the political, social, and economic participation of young people and women.

- Develop infrastructure, including educational curricula and training programs, to enhance the reality of freedom of expression.

To Civil Society:

- Provide safe spaces in all their forms both physically and in the digital realm to protect the freedoms of young people and support their mobilizations for freedom of expression.

To the Youth:

- Use social media platforms, digital spaces, and expertise to create spaces in an informed manner that doesn’t hurt them and benefits their societies.
- Gain the necessary experiences and tools for community organizing to formulate the narrative that young people want to present in civil society and the political arena.

To Media Outlets:

- Provide youth with spaces to express their ideas, opinions, and thoughts, thus supporting their participation in public life and collective matters.

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

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

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