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On-line Political Participation: Fractures and Inequality Between the Citizens

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Abstract

In this work, we are going to show how the number of fractures and sociodemographic inequalities in Tunisia has influenced the on-line political engagement in the country. Here, we will base on the studies done in Tunisia, a small country with relatively homogeneous population which has undergone modernization but still is very unstable in its politics since 2011. However, we are going to develop a deeper understanding of the role of social network in the political arena of Tunisia.

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1. Introduction

Since 2011, the question of new information technology and communication (ICT) among the Tunisian society has been largely discussed by the media people, and by this, it greatly attracted the interest of many researchers.

In fact, during the Ben Ali dictatorship, the political participation was extremely limited, and even the time when it happened to be accessed, it still remained censorial and biased. Consequently, a big divergence between the citizens and the political figures appeared on the scene. However, even if the revolution pushed the country towards the democratic transition, a lot of citizens still remained too distant from the political life.

The aim of this research work is to study how the users of the media networks are sorted out by their political and civil engagement, and how politically active and non-active people differ in their manners as the users of social media. Thus, our goal is to explore the impact of social media on the democratic transition in Tunisia.

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In the first part of the research work we will try to elaborate the state of the on-line political participation. The second part will be devoted to the study of the political engagement in Tunisia at different temporal stages, and the last part will regard the method and conclusion of our study.

2. On-line political engagement

In all the countries whether they are democratic or not, there are a number of political participation models with the existence of various concepts in each society. The political participation is defined as an action posed by the citizens in order to influence the leaders or just to express their support or opposition on the ideas proposed by the political parties or simply by the politicians. In fact, it is based on all the activities that directly or indirectly affect the treatment of the government or political authorities in the delicate subjects concerning the citizens (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995).

At the same time, the political participation covers the attitude and the behavior in general which is intended to influence, maintain or modify the decisions of the authorities inside the political system (Pasquino, 2009).

Up to the beginning of 1960s, the political participation and democratic practice were limited in the number of activists which based on election campaign of the parties. So, the candidates were the only means of contact between the citizens and elected representatives. However, for most of the citizens, the use of information technology and communications and particularly the internet made it possible to break the isolation and the censorship; to spread information and to express the indignation concerning this or that context, that is to say - "internet manifests the democratic opportunities" (Cardon, 2010).

Even today, the use of social media is of great importance. It turned into the means of dialogue and communication between the political figures and institutions. In fact, it allowed the mobilization and activation of citizens in political and social problems, and at the same time gave them opportunity to be the producers and the distributors of the information on their own (Cadron & Granjon, 2010). According to the changes in this intermediary space, it became possible to distinguish between two types of on-line political behavior: the participation and the communication. For instance, participating in the campaign via internet, creating Web pages or pages on Facebook in order to rejoin or integrate the political group, etc. are considered to be the forms of on-line political participation; whereas, following the group or the candidate does not mean to participate but to use social network as a way of obtaining information or just communicating (Hoffman, 2012).

Thus, the on-line activism, a massive use of internet, the public space enlargement and the information flow have transformed the relationship between the citizens and their representatives, and also metamorphosed the mediation and the political participation as well (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Monnoyer-Smith, 2011).

At the same time, the use of social networks may have three targets: information, discussion and mobilization (Breindl, 2010). The first target is based on transparency and better participation of the citizens in the information distribution in its temporal and space dimensions, which qualifies the social networks as the "media alternatives".

The second goal is the discussion which is based on the desire of the citizens to virtually express their ideas on political topics, i.e. "active citizens" engaged into the paramount debates, civil fight and duties. Finally, the third aim is mobilization and activation of the citizens for the participation in political and social problems, where the citizens become the producers or distributors of the information themselves. In this case, the citizens are well-informed and engaged into an active participation in political process and we call them "participating citizens". This new phenomenon of internet activism greatly attracts the attention of researchers who investigate the differences between the on-line participation, the numeric fracture, the measure of on-line participation and the borders of participation.

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