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Constructions of Democratic Citizenship and Civic Education in Tunisia

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Abstract

Although Tunisia has made significant progress in establishing procedural democracy since the 2011 revolution, the state still faces significant challenges in consolidating their new spirit of democracy throughout society. This trouble includes difficulty fostering participation from its citizens, particularly among youth aged 18-30. This article hypothesizes that these difficulties stems largely from the state's failure to construct a concept of Tunisian citizenship in line with democratic ideologies. Citizenship construction is considered as a political science concept that describes the mechanisms by which states relate with their citizenry with the goal of defining citizen interactions with the government and national community. This article focuses on the Tunisian national civic education curriculum as a citizenship creating mechanism. From an analysis of civic education content and pedagogy through primary materials and interviews, it is found that while the Tunisian civic education curriculum works to create a citizenry that supports the mechanisms of a procedural democracy, it does not reach the ideological backings necessary to support the long term goals of democratic government. In order to solve these shortcomings, the article suggests reforming the national civic education curriculum to focus more on critical thinking, diverse perspectives and student engagement with communities outside of the classroom. With these changes, it is believed that the civic education curriculum can work to support rule of law, government transparency and community coexistence for meaningful citizen participation in government and the longevity of democracy in Tunisia.

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Introduction

In 2011, months-long protests around the country ousted long time Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and began a publicly supported transition to procedural democracy. In the 9 years since the former president's dismissal, Tunisia has worked to establish democratic institutions and procedures and protect the personal freedoms and civil liberties of its citizens. Today, the state is considered to be the highest level of "free" by Freedom House due to consistent peaceful transitions of power, free and fair elections, and a growing commitment to citizen civil liberties and political rights.¹ In 2014, the Tunisian Constituent Assembly published a new constitution that focused on citizen rights, separation of powers, citizen equality and a republican structure of government.² Since the publication of this new constitution, Tunisia has worked to consolidate democracy around the principles of personal freedom and protect the fragile structure currently in place.

However, despite the liberal foundations of the 2011 revolution and subsequent political reforms, democracy in Tunisia has faced significant challenges. One of the most discussed challenges in Tunisia today is a lack of youth participation in government.³ While the constitution claims that "the state seeks to provide the necessary conditions for developing the capacities of youth and realizing their potential, supports them to assume responsibility, and strives to extend and generalize their participation in social, economic, cultural and political development",⁴ youth in Tunisia today continue to feel disconnected from their state and disinclined to participate in government.⁵ The future of democracy in Tunisia is threatened

¹ "Tunisia," Freedom House, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2020>.

² Constituent Assembly, "Tunisia's Constitution of 2014," January 27, 2014.

³ Elena Sánchez-Montijano, Jose SÁNCHEZ García, and Jose SÁNCHEZ García, *Youth at the Margins : Perspectives on Arab Mediterranean Youth* (Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429398988>.

⁴ Constituent Assembly, "Tunisia's Constitution of 2014.," Article 8

⁵ Sánchez-Montijano, García, and García, *Youth at the Margins*.

without the key voices of youth in government, for youth need to understand and believe in the principles of democracy in order to sustain and one day take over government positions and prevent further civil unrest. This challenge is compounded by a rising threat of radical fundamentalism, populism, and Islamist rhetoric, leading many Tunisians to be weary of the future prosperity of their newly established democracy.⁶

One of the main sources of this lack of participation is that, while the Tunisian constitution lays out a number of liberal values and protections afforded to its citizens, this construction of Tunisian citizenship is not supported throughout society. Citizenship, as a political science concept, is consistently constructed both by state and civic communities through everyday practices of relations between the citizen and the state.⁷ It is these practices that determine how citizens view the role of the state in their lives and their subsequent duties back to the collective community. Consequently, mechanisms of citizenship creation are vastly important in the consolidation of democracy. Democratic government is dependent on the participation of its citizens both practically, through procedures such as voting and running for political office, and ideologically, by exercising and defending their civil rights and liberties. Issues with citizenship arise when there is a disconnect between the rhetoric of citizenship and democracy, such as that demonstrated in the Tunisian constitution, and how citizenship is constructed in the everyday lives of Tunisian citizens. In other words, while the Tunisian constitution promises equal citizenship to all Tunisians, citizens are not able to fully realize those rights without consistent construction of democratic beliefs and ideologies by their government.

⁶ Sihem Drissi, "Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition," *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education* 13, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 93–103, <https://doi.org/10.2304/csee.2014.13.2.93>.

⁷ Mohamed Nachi, "Transition to Democracy in Tunisia: Learning about Citizenship in a National and Transnational Context," *Social Science Information* 55, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 429–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018416658151>.

One of the most well-regulated and widely spread mechanisms of state sponsored citizenship construction is the public education system.⁸ Schools are able to influence entire populations through the creation and implementation of a state curriculum. This study aims to analyze how that curriculum, specifically in civic education courses, impacts the creation of citizenship under the new Tunisian democracy. Through the interpretation of primary civic education materials and first-hand accounts from Tunisian citizens, it has been found that while Tunisia has a well-established civic education program that teaches its students about many important facets of citizenship under a democracy, its failure to deal with the most recent 2011 transition to democracy and support the more liberal perspectives of inclusivity, rule of law and civic engagement has negatively impacted the creation of democratic citizenship in Tunisia. In order to maintain the newly implemented freedoms of democracy written in the Tunisian constitution, it is recommended that the curriculum be reoriented to focus on refining critical thinking, inclusive ideology, and allowing students to process and learn from the current challenges facing their democracy.

Theoretical Foundation

Defining Citizenship

In today's age of globalization and migration, the idea of citizenship is constructed in a myriad of ways. Loosely defined, citizenship is merely belonging to a particular country. The Tunisian constitution, like many others, uses 'citizen' to refer to Tunisian nationals.⁹ In most countries, including Tunisia, this legal term grants individuals rights and duties within their borders. These rights may include the right to health care and physical security or require the duty of military service in states with a mandatory draft. Different states also have different

⁸ Drissi, "Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition."

⁹ Constituent Assembly, "Tunisia's Constitution of 2014."

measures used to define who is granted citizenship within their state, which vary in their treatment of migrants, citizens born abroad, and those with parents of different nationalities.

But citizenship cannot be fully understood when examined only on a legal level. According to Mohamed Nachi, citizenship should be conceptualized beyond its connection to legal status.¹⁰ Citizenship instead is a theoretical understanding of what bonds citizens of a country together, independent from religion, social class or specific cultural identities.¹¹ Instead, citizenship is the intangible and roughly defined source of commonality that determines belonging in any particular country around the world. This may include a shared history, shared cultural understandings and shared national allegiances that are constructed both from a top-down approach, from government to citizens, and from a bottom-up approach rooted in the citizens themselves. By this construction, states build what defines belonging to their state through their interactions with citizens, and citizens construct who belongs to their society through their interactions amongst themselves and with the government.

What citizenship means around the world is unique to the structure and zeitgeist of a government and population during a particular time. As citizen demographics and governing bodies change, how citizenship is constructed likewise changes. Large differences, for example, exist between frameworks of citizenship under democratic versus authoritarian regimes as well as in states with young vs old populations. Consequently, definitions will continually change as governments age and develop. How the Tunisian constitution and subsequent government publications and interactions with the populace define citizenship is necessary to consider in the construction of democracy in Tunisia. In order for Tunisia to continue to strengthen their

¹⁰ Nachi, "Transition to Democracy in Tunisia."

¹¹ Nachi, "Transition to Democracy in Tunisia."

democracy, and address issues of youth disillusionment, it is necessary that all parties come to recognize citizenship to be founded on democratic ideals.

Constructing Democratic Citizenship

Democracy, more than any other political ideology, depends on the support and belief of its citizens. In order for democracy to exist and thrive, its citizens need to both understand what it means to live in a democratic nation and believe in the foundational ideologies at its core. Only these understandings and support can protect the rule of law and prevent the rise of autocratic rule. Therefore, a main component of constructing citizenship is the framing and spreading of democratic ideologies. These ideals include personal freedom and liberty, coexistence in a diverse national community, and participation in government. The Constituent Assembly ensured that the Tunisian constitution of 2014 included all of these principles and more.¹² It is only with these ideologies that citizens of a democracy are able to maintain the balance of a well-organized state governed by the rule of the people and prevent counter revolution, extremism and government controlled propaganda.¹³

A key difference between states founded in democracy from those founded on nationalist or populist ideology is their acceptance of minority populations.¹⁴ While authoritarian regimes thrive on an exclusive and precise definition of citizenship, often defined by race, religion or familial origin, liberal democracies expand their definitions of citizenship to include more opinions and perspectives. This expansion of citizenship allows a greater population to feel welcome and included in the national community as well as encourages coexistence between

¹² Constituent Assembly, "Tunisia's Constitution of 2014."

¹³ Naila Al-Silini, "Citizenship Education in Tunisia: Current Reality and Future Challenges," *Executive Summaries of the Commissioned Background Papers for the Education for Citizenship Project*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2014, 27–29.

¹⁴ Drissi, "Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition."

social groups.¹⁵ The preamble of the Tunisian constitution follows this ideal by promising “the quality of rights and duties between all citizens, male and female, and equality between all regions”¹⁶ as well as freedom of religious practice.¹⁷ It is only through this expansion of citizenship that democracies can thrive.

A diverse expansion of citizenship is especially important in post-revolutionary contexts such as Tunisia. Among many reasons for the beginning of the Tunisian revolution in 2011 was growing political discontent of marginalized groups in society, including, but not limited to, Tunisian youth.¹⁸ Young people in Tunisia and across the Middle East grew disillusioned with the rule of law in their states because of the injustice and lack of equality. Even in the new government established after the revolution, which claims to represent the will of all people, Tunisian youth are often discussed but rarely represented.¹⁹ Youth are consistently at the forefront of politician’s agendas, with discussions of youth unemployment and youth participation in voting common to anyone familiar with Tunisian politics, but youth themselves are rarely present to contribute to these conversations themselves. Young women especially are excluded from conversations of their own fate, as they are rarely represented at any level of government.²⁰ Therefore, it is imperative to solving the above problems commonly associated with Tunisian youth, as well as other minority groups, to construct a concept of citizenship that is inclusive of a more diverse population.

In order for a functioning democracy to be sustained on a legal level, the operational duties and benefits of citizenship need to be communicated to all citizens. Well-functioning

¹⁵ Al-Silini, “Citizenship Education in Tunisia: Current Reality and Future Challenges.”

¹⁶ Constituent Assembly, “Tunisia’s Constitution of 2014.”

¹⁷ Constituent Assembly, Art. 6

¹⁸ Sánchez-Montijano, García, and García, *Youth at the Margins*.

¹⁹ Sanchez-Montijano, Garcia and Garcia.

²⁰ Sanchez-Montijano, Garcia and Garcia.

democracies depend on the participation of citizens in government and an active and healthy civil sphere.²¹ Therefore, citizens need to be aware not only of the ideological backings of citizenship within their country, but of their rights as citizens. These include the right to freedom of speech, protection and equal opportunities as well as their role within the larger governing body, such as the responsibility to vote in local and state wide elections. The Tunisian constitution clearly defines these rights, promising “freedom of opinion, thought, expression, information and publication shall be guaranteed” without being “subjected to prior censorship” to all citizens, as well as their duties to the state.²²

Consequently, citizenship built around the concrete practices and ideological foundations will work to strengthen a democracy and prevent the rise of counter revolution, extremism and government sponsored propaganda.²³ When citizens feel recognized and represented in their governing bodies, they are less likely to revolt or form rebellion movements.²⁴ Additionally, authoritarian rulers are less likely to gain power in states with a strong civil sphere and rule of law. The Tunisian constitution has worked to promote these ideologies in the foundation of their democracy. Therefore, when ideas of citizenship unify populations across geographic locations, socioeconomic class, race, religion and other demographic indicators around ideas of democracy, the government will be more likely to maintain their democratic character.

Education as a Citizenship Constructing Mechanism

A main vehicle of citizenship creation is the public education system. States hold the power to construct and impart a uniform narrative on generations of citizens, centered around their national interests. As with ideas of citizenship more broadly, how states choose to construct

²¹ Drissi, “Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition.”

²² Constituent Assembly, “Tunisia’s Constitution of 2014.” Art. 31

²³ Drissi, “Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition.”

²⁴ Drissi.

their public education systems depend widely on the character of the governing body. Similar to how citizenship under authoritarian regimes often teaches individuals to be obedient under the law of the ruling class, education systems under authoritarian regimes thrive on blind support of the regime.²⁵ All public education aims to shed the state in a positive light, however the narrative form of that support is indicative of the form of the government. Teaching in democratic states, therefore, must be carefully constructed to give students a positive light of their country and support the legitimacy of democracy while also giving them the space and freedom to practice the principles of free speech and transparency that democracy supports.

One of the main forms of framing national consciousness is imparting values and morals onto generations, especially in regard to how they see their country. Through the retelling of all subjects, particularly history and civic education, states are able to control not only what they know about their country but also how they think about it. In a study of Turkish civic education after 1980, Kaplan wrote that the education system frames power relations in student's small and large communities as well as gives them the tools to question their national identities.²⁶ In this way, the education system can support government legitimacy through only teaching young populations favorable characteristics and historical narrative of the nation.

Another key consideration of national education systems is controlling who is included in the rhetoric of citizenship. This includes both what histories are shared and the perspectives from which they are told. This was a particularly pertinent question in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. Ahonen discusses this issue in *Politics of identity through history curriculum: narratives of the past for social exclusion—or inclusion?*, noting specifically the consequences

²⁵ N. J. Brown, "The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 2 (January 1, 2007): 484–85, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-2007-023>.

²⁶ Brown.

of national history curricula in Estonia and Eastern Germany.²⁷ While both states faced challenges in creating a concept of national citizenship after gaining independence, their governments took different approaches in representing their shared histories. Curriculum writers in Estonia prioritized creating a strong sense of uniform nationalism by representing only the perspective of the ethnic Estonian majority, while German writers focused more on an inclusive approach. While the study found that Estonian children had a stronger sense of nationalism, minority groups were left with feelings of social exclusion. Students in Germany did not identify with the state to the same extent, but also did not have as strong feelings of social exclusion due to the national narrative communicated through history education.²⁸ Ahonen writes,

“As history is used for identity building, any grand narrative diffused through a school curriculum tends to reinforce a uniform identity. Those with no place or role in the grand narrative will be excluded from the historical community. They either face a sense of double consciousness or lack resources to face up to their past. As the rationality of future expectations is dependent on a sense of the interdependence of the past, present and future, those who are excluded lack an important asset for the building of future expectations”.²⁹

In this way, who is included in the current history curriculum has a direct impact on their future feeling of belonging. As an inclusive national identity is necessary for the functioning of a healthy democracy, it is imperative that history curricula aim to expand who is included within that identity by sharing diverse perspectives.

Finally, the methods of teaching history and civic education develop skills that are necessary for democratic citizens. For instance, Sihem Drissi emphasizes the need for democratically focused pedagogy and content to work hand-in-hand to impart democratic

²⁷ Sirkka Ahonen, “Politics of Identity through History Curriculum: Narratives of the Past for Social Exclusion - or Inclusion?,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 33, no. 2 (April 2, 2001): 179–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270010011202>.

²⁸ Ahonen.

²⁹ Ahonen, 190

principles and morals on students.³⁰ These skills include critical thinking, open discussion and independently guided study. She writes that “mastering analytical skills of thinking, having critical views, and communication strategies and tools” across all disciplines work to internalize democratic values in their students.³¹ When students are encouraged to participate in the classroom, they are more likely to transfer those same skills to participating in wider conversations. Similarly, fostering a critical perspective in the classroom in regard to both academic and real life materials motivates students to be critical of their government and society as a whole. It is with these skills that students are able to participate fully in their democracy due to practices learned in the classroom.

Method

This study was originally planned to be conducted from Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia as a part of the *SIT Tunisia and Italy: Politics and Religious Integration in the Mediterranean* program. Due to unforeseen global circumstances in wake of the spread of the Coronavirus, the research plan had to be readjusted to be conducted remotely from the United States. Research was gathered primarily through interviews and interpretation of primary sources by way of Tunisian civic education textbooks. Two main interviews were conducted- one in English with a Tunisian primary school principal and former teacher, and the second in Arabic with a current Tunisian sixth grade student and their family. In order to protect the privacy of the identities of these two interview subjects, their identities will remain anonymous and will be referred to without any specific indicators such as name or place of residence. As the research was conducted remotely, online textbooks were substituted for physical copies, and interpretation was done by the researcher from Arabic to English. Findings from these primary sources were then supplemented

³⁰ Drissi, “Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition.”

³¹ Drissi, 94

by information gathered from secondary sources pertaining to civic education in Tunisia, which will continue to be referenced throughout the study. The project was conducted over four weeks under the supervision of Professor Mohamed Limem and Professor Mounir Khelifa to be circulated only through the SIT program and for consideration of the Barnard Education Department.

Research Findings

It is with this understanding of the importance of civic and history education as a citizenship building mechanism that civic education in Tunisia will be considered. As Tunisia is a new democracy coming from 23 years of dictatorship under Ben Ali, it is especially important that students are socialized in support of the new democratic structure of government. While the 2011 revolution was mainly political, it has had a significant impact on the character of the civil sphere and character of the education system. Since its founding in 1956, Tunisian national public schools have had a fairly robust civic education curriculum, especially in comparison with other civic education programs in neighboring countries.³² However, these programs have remained relatively unchanged despite significant political changes over the past decade. The last major reform to the Tunisian civic education curriculum was in 2002, when Education Minister Mohamed Charfi released new civic education textbooks with a more secular and tolerant approach to teaching religion.³³ Therefore, citizenship is constructed in primarily the same way now as it was under Ben Ali in the civic education curriculum. In order to shift constructions of citizenship imparted on Tunisian students to match those in the 2014 constitution, the national

³² Hassan Ramoun, "School in the Maghreb and the discourse on citizenship: an approach through civic education books," *Insaniyat / إنسانيات. Revue algérienne d'anthropologie et de sciences sociales*, no. 60–61 (September 30, 2013): 35–64, <https://doi.org/10.4000/insaniyat.14117>.

³³ Mohamed Charfi and Hamadi Redissi, "Teaching Tolerance and Open-Minded Approaches to Sacred Texts," in *International Perspectives on the Goals of Universal Basic and Secondary Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2010), 145–75.

civic education curriculum needs to be read critically and reimagined for a new age of democracy.

Current Structure and Content of Civic Education in Tunisia

Civic education in Tunisia is mandatory for all students in public schools from grade 5 until graduation. In a conversation with a Tunisian primary school principal and former teacher, she described civic education classes as having a fairly similar structure daily. Students in grade 5 attend civic education classes for 1 hour per week. The lessons from her experience typically start with a discussion around the topic of the week: beginning with an open question followed by small group discussions before turning to textbook materials.³⁴ As students get older, civic education lessons take on less importance in comparison with other subjects. While it is still mandatory for all students to take civic education classes, they are not assigned the same weight/coefficient as other subjects such as math or English. While most main subjects are assigned a coefficient of 4 or 3, civic education is only given weighted with a coefficient of 0.5. Because civic education is only given a fraction of the weight of other subjects, it is therefore not given the same consideration and effort by students and teachers. This lack of attention increases the difficulty of imparting meaningful lessons on students.

Subject matter taught in civic education classes from grade 5-12 can be broken down into 5 main categories: relationships, understanding the government, duties to the government and community, rights and freedoms, and history. Relationships were cited as one of the most important takeaways from the civic education curriculum by the previously mentioned primary school principal and are most prominently featured in the earlier years of primary civic education.³⁵ These lessons focus on family relationships, the importance of respect in the

³⁴ Yosra Ben Mbarek, Interview with Yosra Ben Mbarek, Video Conference, May 27, 2020.

³⁵ Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة", Ben Mbarek, Interview with Yosra Ben Mbarek.

household, and role of the child within their academic and social communities.³⁶ Similarly, civic education curricula teach students about their duties to other people within social and cultural contexts and relationships with administration. Although civic education has a political connotation, as the definition of civic is relating to a city, town or local area, curriculum subject matter reaches beyond official relationships to construct the identity of Tunisian students from a young age. In this way, students learn not only how to exist in relation with their governments, but as a person in society as a whole.

Understanding the government is a key purpose of civic education. Students in civic education courses in Tunisia are taught about the structure of their government and the procedures that keep it functioning, such as the importance of elections. Younger students begin civic education by learning about the role of the president, prime minister and administrative organizations.³⁷ In sixth grade, students learn about the organization of the state, including the differences between municipal and state governments as well as the distinct roles of the president and prime minister.³⁸ Students come to understand how the president is in charge of external affairs and security and the more specific roles of ministers.³⁹ Civic education courses also include teaching students about government institutions and the electoral system.⁴⁰ The curriculum calls for students to hold their own mock elections for class representatives in order to learn about the experience of voting and campaigns first hand.⁴¹ Finally, in the last years of civic education, students briefly discuss questions of the modern democratic state. It is unclear how far these conversations go and the extent to which these discussions refer to the challenges

³⁶ Ben Mbarek, Interview with Yosra Ben Mbarek.

³⁷ Anissa Dababi, Interview with Anissa Dababi, Video Conference, May 28, 2020.

³⁸ Nouraldin Ben Khadr, *Civic Education Book for Basic Sixth Grade Education* (Tunis, 2014).

³⁹ Ben Khadr.

⁴⁰ Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة".

⁴¹ Ramoun.

after the 2011 revolution from the accessed materials, however their main goal was to give students a more well-rounded vision of the functioning of their government.

Coinciding with teaching students about their relationships and their government is the emphasis of civic education classes on the duties of the student to their government and community. Students learn about the expectations of good citizenship within their state, ranging from broad ideologies such as showing respect to laws and administrative organizations,⁴² to more specific practices, such as what to do in case of a road accident and their duty to pay taxes and fees.⁴³ Starting from sixth grade, students learn about the importance of valuing their government and state as a whole, including the maintenance of public facilities and treating public officials with respect.⁴⁴ Students are also taught about the duty of voting in elections, learning specifically about the terms of voters as a duty to the state.⁴⁵ As students get older, they learn more about the theoretical foundations of their duties to the state, such as the concepts of pluralism and deliberation, as well as their duty and right to citizen participation in associative and partisan life.⁴⁶ It is also within the concept of duty to the state that students learn about the concept of nations and nationhood.⁴⁷ Students learn about the concept of a national identity and their place within Tunisian society. Classes discuss how this citizenship then applies in legal, political and administrative dimensions.⁴⁸ Finally, in the last year of the civic education curriculum, students learn to expand their concept of citizen duty to the international community.⁴⁹ Sources and discussions teach students about their role as a global citizen and

⁴² Ben Khadr, *Civic Education Book for Basic Sixth Grade Education*.

⁴³ Ben Mbarek, Interview with Yosra Ben Mbarek.

⁴⁴ Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة".

⁴⁵ Ben Mbarek, Interview with Yosra Ben Mbarek.

⁴⁶ Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة".

⁴⁷ Ramoun.

⁴⁸ Ramoun.

⁴⁹ Ramoun.

problems that the world faces together, such as global poverty, problems of democracy, international conflicts, environmental protection and scientific and technological advancement.⁵⁰ It is in this way that civic education classes expand to teach students about their role as a citizen inside their local, national and international communities.

In addition, students learn about their duties to the state in conversation with the rights and freedoms afforded to them as members of the Tunisian society. Civic education courses teach Tunisian children from a young age about the concepts of private and public property⁵¹ and services that they receive from the government, such as health care and sanitation.⁵² Students also learn about their rights specifically as children as well as those of women and the elderly and their right to participate in public life through voting in elections.⁵³ These freedoms are extensive, including, but not limited to: freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom to choose a place of residence and exercise responsibility in the social, cultural and natural environment.⁵⁴ Tunisian youth are also educated about their rights, such as the right to health care, education and work, right to association and political freedom, the right to equality before the courts and justice system and the right to tolerance and protection from exclusion and violence. With an understanding of their rights as citizens and children, Tunisian citizens are given a more well-rounded perspective of their place as citizens within the nation.

Finally, students learn lessons of civic education in conjunction with history and geography. In younger grades, classes start by teaching Tunisian history.⁵⁵ Students study the

⁵⁰ Ramoun.

⁵¹ Ben Mbarek, Interview with Yosra Ben Mbarek.

⁵² Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة".

⁵³ Ramoun.

⁵⁴ Ramoun.

⁵⁵ Dababi, Interview with Anissa Dababi.

fight for Tunisian independence from France and the plight of famous historical figures such as Kheireddine Pasha and Ahmed Bey.⁵⁶ They also learn about the lessons of the enlightenment and the history of the Islamic Empire.⁵⁷ Part of the reforms of the late 1990s by Mohoammed Charfi worked to add Tunisian history from before the Arab conquest to the civic education curriculum, such as the history of Carthage under the Romans and the Byzantines.⁵⁸ Now, all students take a mandatory visit to the Carthage National Museum to learn about pre-Islamic history.⁵⁹ As students get older, they learn more about French and Italian history, as they have had a significant influence on the trajectory of Tunisian history and current socio-political context. In the final years of civic education, students also learn more generally about the fall of totalitarian states, traditions of their state and the differences between statehood in the west and in the Islamic world.⁶⁰ As with lessons about the structure of the government, it is unclear if these lessons have been significantly altered since the 2011 revolution to situate Tunisian recent history within this larger historical narrative. Overall, these history lessons give students context to consider their current political context and lives within the Tunisian society.

Discussion/Analysis

Positive Constructions of Citizenship within the Tunisian Civic Education Curriculum

Although technically all content taught in civic education courses works to construct ideas of citizenship, the above content can be summarized into a few main lessons imparted on students. Firstly, students learn practical lessons about the Tunisian government and its functions. Not to be overlooked, lessons about the roles of government bodies and ministers as

⁵⁶ Dababi.

⁵⁷ Dababi.

⁵⁸ Charfi and Redissi, "Teaching Tolerance and Open-Minded Approaches to Sacred Texts."

⁵⁹ Charfi and Redissi.

⁶⁰ Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة".

well as the structure of government are important in raising citizens who are knowledgeable about their government. With this knowledge citizens will be better equipped growing up to participate in government themselves. Studies conducted in other regions of the world, such as Canada, have found a positive correlation between students who participate in civic education programs and those who are more likely to participate in elections and other forms of government engagement.⁶¹ It has been found that when students understand their government and feel to be a part of it, they feel more of a responsibility to take action and participate. Therefore, the inclusion of lessons about the structure of the government are important in ensuring the political participation of future generations of Tunisians and constructing citizenship around the principle of an involved populace.

Additionally, civic education courses construct citizenship in relation to the place of students in the national community. These teachings span from students learning about their place in smaller communities, such as elementary lessons on school and family relationships, to their belonging within the larger national community. Creating a close relationship between belonging to a personal community, such as that of school and the families, and the public community imparts on students from a young age the importance of a personal connection to their nation. By teaching students to relate the close relationships that they have with their families and classmates to those that they have with their nation and national community foster a stronger sense of nationalism and pride.⁶² These lessons are especially visible in civic lessons about Tunisian history. When students learn to relate to their community and their shared history

⁶¹ Ellen Claes, Marc Hooghe, and Dietlind Stolle, “The Political Socialization of Adolescents in Canada: Differential Effects of Civic Education on Visible Minorities,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 3 (September 2009): 613–36.

⁶² Matias Gardin, Ragnhild Barbu, and Barbara Rothmuller, “Educating Future Citizens in between Mischkultur Nationalism and Authoritie...,” *History of Education* 44, no. 5 (2015): 537–52.

through a unified perspective, such as that demonstrated in the Tunisian curriculum, they are more likely to report stronger feelings of national unity later in life.⁶³ Consequently, Tunisian civic education courses work to create citizenship based on a unified national community through teaching students to relate to a single historical narrative and take pride in their relationships with their country.

Similarly, citizenship is constructed around transactional relationships between duties and rights and citizen and state. By framing the two concepts of duty and rights together, students learn that they are part of a reciprocal relationship with their government that relies both on their own responsibilities and the fulfilment of government duties. For example, students learn that they are responsible for paying their taxes and respecting public officials and properties.⁶⁴ In return, they learn of their entitlement to government health care and personal freedoms.⁶⁵ An understanding of this relationship helps contribute to citizen trust in government and fulfilment of their civic duties. Citizens learn that their government is responsible for protecting them, as well as their duty to serve the national community. Additionally, on a wider scale, human rights education has been broadly praised as having long term effects on the protection of human rights around the world. When students are educated about their rights, they are more likely to not only recognize human rights violations in their own lives, but to recognize and report those in their surrounding community and support the overall protection of society.⁶⁶ With these positive benefits in mind, educating students about their rights and duties has a positive effect on

⁶³ Ahonen, "Politics of Identity through History Curriculum."

⁶⁴ Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة."

⁶⁵ Ramoun.

⁶⁶ Alison E. C. Struthers, *Teaching Human Rights in Primary Schools: Overcoming the Barriers to Effective Practice*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

democratic citizenship in Tunisia and lends itself to the creation of a population who are able to understand and claim their rights.

Non-Democratic Constructions of Citizenship

With these positive lessons of citizenship come other areas in which civic education in Tunisia does not align with the ideologies of democratic citizenship outlined in the 2014 constitution. Firstly, the common structure of Tunisian civic education classes is not conducive to democratic conversations. As mentioned above, typical civic education classes are based on lessons in textbooks. While some teachers include discussions, as mentioned by one elementary school teacher interviewed,⁶⁷ lessons typically follow a rote-learning pedagogy, which consists of students copying and memorizing information verbatim from their teachers' lectures and textbook materials.⁶⁸ These methods have been popular for centuries in education for their efficiency and uniformity, however they have been found to not be conducive to promoting democratic ideology in the classroom.⁶⁹ Teaching students to accept lessons and repeat information given to them imparts lessons of obedience to authority, rather than freedom and liberty, which are ideologies associated with authoritarian governance.⁷⁰ Instead, in order for education to not only teach democracy but promote its ideologies within academic settings, all classes, not only civic education, need to be reoriented to promote critical pedagogy through independent research, discussion and critical thinking.

To ensure the prevention of imposing a singular national narrative on all students, civic education curricula should introduce sources and pedagogical tools that encourage reading history from multiple perspectives. As mentioned previously, it is imperative to democracy

⁶⁷ Ben Mbarek, Interview with Yosra Ben Mbarek.

⁶⁸ Drissi, "Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition."

⁶⁹ Drissi.

⁷⁰ Drissi.

building that multiple perspectives, including those of minorities, are included in the national narrative to promote coexistence.⁷¹ The Tunisian education system is currently centered around Tunisian history and told from a majority Muslim and Arab perspective. Although reforms in the late 1990s aimed to secularize the curriculum, there is still little mention of minority religious or ethnic perspectives in the state-wide civic education curriculum.⁷² In order to expand citizenship and support the inclusive and liberal ideologies of democracy, the civic education curriculum should focus not only on the history of ethnic Tunisians, but of minorities and other regions of the world. This includes introducing sources written from diverse perspectives and allowing students to conduct their own research to learn independently about regions and issues of student interest. The final years of the Tunisian civic education curriculum are already beginning to make these adjustments to think about citizenship more globally.⁷³ By adjusting to include inclusive perspectives at all levels in regards to both content and pedagogy, the Tunisian government could ensure the continued inclusion of minority voices and promote coexistence at all levels of society.

Additionally, students should learn how to view their government through a critical lens in order to promote constructive criticism. It has been shown that when students learn to criticize their government constructively, their associated rates of civic engagement rise. In *Civic Engagement and Patriotism*, Sean Richey demonstrates the relationship between feelings of critical patriotism and rates of civic engagement in democracies.⁷⁴ He questions the causation between rising rates of patriotism and civic engagement, qualifying the difference between blind and critical patriotism. Richey writes, “it is better for citizens to remain critical of the system,

⁷¹ Ahonen, “Politics of Identity through History Curriculum.”

⁷² Charfi and Redissi, “Teaching Tolerance and Open-Minded Approaches to Sacred Texts.”

⁷³ Ramoun, “المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة.”

⁷⁴ Sean Richey, “Civic Engagement and Patriotism,” *Social Science Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (2011): 1044–56.

rather than be forced into civic participation programs that reinforce blind patriotism”.⁷⁵ The article classifies programs that encourage citizens to be patriotic without giving them the space and opportunity to criticize their governments as “blind patriotism” and warns states of the dangers of these kinds of programs. With this kind of education, citizens will end up not participating in civic engagement, for they do not feel that they have the responsibility and power to change their state. Rather, citizens should learn that they have an active role in the function of their governments through learning about their government’s flaws and engaging in open conversations about both those problems and potential solutions. Civic engagement in Tunisia falls vulnerable to this lack of political participation, as a large percentage of Tunisian youth already do not participate in public discourse.⁷⁶ The prevalence of “blind patriotism” in education contributes to fostering citizens who do not feel a connection to the trajectory of their government.

Civic education should also be expanded to give students the opportunity to gain experience working outside of the classroom in order to build a stronger connection to their local communities. As previously discussed, one of the main themes of civic education courses in Tunisia is constructing a national community.⁷⁷ To best impart these values on their students, and ensure the accurate representation of Tunisian society, curricula should be expanded to bring students outside of the classroom to engage with these discussed communities in alternative methods, such as community service.⁷⁸ In a study of civic education in Canada, researchers found that youth participate more in politics as adults when they engage in hands-on curricula

⁷⁵ Richey, 1045.

⁷⁶ Sánchez-Montijano, García, and García, *Youth at the Margins*.

⁷⁷ Ramoun, “المدرسة في البلدان المغربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة.”

⁷⁸ Claes, Hooghe, and Stolle, “The Political Socialization of Adolescents in Canada: Differential Effects of Civic Education on Visible Minorities.”

during their time in school.⁷⁹ The research found that all civic education programs had a positive effect on youth engagement with politics later in life, and these results grew when programs allowed students to take part in programs that included activities outside of the classroom, such as community service programs.⁸⁰ Currently, the Tunisian civic education curriculum does not call for students to complete any kind of community service projects outside of their school. In order to help students learn about the importance of civic action and promote community service after graduation, the curriculum could be expanded to give students more opportunities to gain hands-on community service experience.

Additionally, although civic education classes in Tunisia work to educate students about their personal rights, the framing of these personal freedoms is not conducive to liberal democracy, but rather to a paternalistic perspective of government control. As mentioned previously, Tunisian students learn about the rights and liberties afforded to them as citizens in conversation with the duties that they owe to the state.⁸¹ While this reciprocal relationship might be successful in ensuring that students in Tunisia are aware of their rights in order to claim them, framing the conversation in this way perpetuates a paternalistic view of the state. The state is constructed as responsible for giving rights to its citizens, rather than acting as a protector of rights, as is supported in liberal democracies.⁸² While civic education courses may teach Tunisian youth about the functions of the government as democratic, such as electing officials and teaching students about their rights, that democracy is devalued to only the function of governments by not including the ideological backing of freedom and personal liberty. In order

⁷⁹ Claes, Hooghe, and Stolle.

⁸⁰ Claes, Hooghe, and Stolle.

⁸¹ Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة".

⁸² Mounir Kchaou, "The Culture of the National Liberation Movement and the Change Towards Democracy: The Case of North Africa," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2020, 1–11.

to better protect those beliefs, civic education curricula should reframe the conversation of rights from privileges afforded by the government to laws put in place to protect the innate dignity and liberty to which all individuals are entitled.

Finally, civic education in Tunisia today does not give students the opportunity to learn about and process their most recent and significant political history- the 2011 revolution. In order to learn about the function and challenges of their current government, students need to be exposed to accurate information about the 2011 revolution and the resulting changed structure of government.⁸³ This is not possible when civic education materials have not been significantly altered since the late 1990s.⁸⁴ It is unclear from the available materials if lessons about the structure of the government have shifted. However, there is no record of specific lessons written about the revolution. This absence leaves a hole in the history education of Tunisian students and does not allow them the opportunity to unpack and discuss events that have had a significant effect on their current social and political climate. In addition to teaching about the events and subsequent changes of the revolution, it is important that teachers are able to impart the ideological backings on which the revolution was founded. Students should learn about the plight of their state's recent history in order to build a sense of national pride and understand the reason why civic participation is direly necessary. Without an understanding of the differences between their current government and the dictatorship of the not so distant past, students will not appreciate the freedoms and liberties allowed to them today or be motivated to participate in their government.

⁸³ Joel Rozen, "Civics Lesson: Ambivalence, Contestation, and Curricular Change in Tunisia," *Ethnos* 80, no. 5 (October 20, 2015): 605–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.938092>.

⁸⁴ Charfi and Redissi, "Teaching Tolerance and Open-Minded Approaches to Sacred Texts."

Suggested Curricular Reforms

To work to construct democratic citizenship that promotes not only the procedural functioning of democratic government in Tunisia but also promotes the underlying ideologies of democracy, the Tunisian civic education curriculum needs to be reformed. It has been discussed how education, as a uniform body of knowledge consistently communicated to citizenship populations, works as a citizenship constructing mechanism.⁸⁵ The lessons imparted onto students teach them how to relate to their state and local communities, their rights and duties, and define what it means to be Tunisian.⁸⁶ With this understanding, current civic education classes in Tunisia today work to teach students about their shared Tunisian history and how to understand their government, but fall short in sharing the underlying ideologies of democracy that are necessary to maintain a healthy functioning system with strong rule of law, civic participation and minority rights.

Firstly, civic education classes need to be given more weight relative to other subjects in schools. As discussed, civic education classes are assigned only a fraction of the coefficient of other classes. While staple high school classes such as math or Arabic are given a coefficient of 3 or 4, civic education is only marked as 0.5. This difference has a direct impact on the care and effort given to these subjects by students, for they are aware that their grades in these classes do not have the same effect on their overall grades and future prospects. In order to commit to teaching students about their country and the key goals and lessons outlined both by the civic education curriculum and the goals of democracy in Tunisia as a whole, civic education needs to be given the same weight as other subjects. When students have to care about their work in civic

⁸⁵ Brown, "The Pedagogical State."

⁸⁶ Ramoun, "المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة."

education as much as other subjects, they will be more likely to retain the class's important lessons.

To counteract these shortcomings, the civic education curriculum needs to work to include more perspectives in their history curriculum. While there have been improvements made to include Tunisian history from before Arab conquest,⁸⁷ expanding authorship to include a more diverse range of perspectives would open citizenship up to include more minority groups in the construction of Tunisian citizenship, who may not identify with this strictly Tunisian history, and encourage coexistence. Included in this expansion of history is diversifying representations of religious communities. The Tunisian constitution promises protection to all religions, not just the Muslim majority.⁸⁸ Including different perspectives in the civic education and history curricula would ensure the protection of this freedom from extremism based in ignorance. It has been found that states that examine history from more perspectives are less likely to isolate minority populations.⁸⁹ In order for Tunisia to protect the freedoms promised to its citizens, the history and civic education curriculum needs to be expanded to teach students to be accepting to those from different backgrounds.

Pedagogically, civic education classes and all other classes in the Tunisian education system should be reoriented to focus on critical thinking, independently guided research and hands on experience. By teaching students critical thinking skills from a young age in school, they will grow up to be more equipped to engage critically with their communities and the government at large.⁹⁰ The Tunisian democracy is based on the principles of freedom of speech

⁸⁷ Charfi and Redissi, "Teaching Tolerance and Open-Minded Approaches to Sacred Texts."

⁸⁸ Constituent Assembly, "Tunisia's Constitution of 2014.", Art. 6.

⁸⁹ Ahonen, "Politics of Identity through History Curriculum."

⁹⁰ Drissi, "Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition."

and rule of law.⁹¹ Teaching students how to criticize constructively and encouraging them to speak their minds about the government will impart a more democratically founded idea of citizenship than current ideas of limited free speech under Ben Ali. These skills are especially pertinent in regard to teaching students to engage with current issues facing democracy in Tunisia today. When students learn openly about the problems facing their country in an environment that is open for discussion and debate, they are more readily equipped to think about and eventually solve these problems themselves.⁹² These lessons will also thus be framed to better support ideals of government transparency, which is another key theme of the Tunisian constitution.⁹³ Finally, students will learn these lessons more thoroughly if taught through engaging, hands on models.⁹⁴ When given the opportunity to see their communities and visualize their own role and impact, students will be more likely to continue to engage in meaningful ways.⁹⁵ With these pedagogical shifts, civic education in Tunisia holds the potential to make real difference not only in the ideas of young students, but on the citizenship practices and health of Democracy in Tunisia.

Conclusion

The above discoveries and analysis of Tunisia's civic education curriculum are pertinent to today's discussion of how to best protect the future of the state's democracy.⁹⁶ By examining how citizenship is constructed in public education, one of the most uniform and well defined means of government messaging, one can understand better how current Tunisian citizens relate

⁹¹ Constituent Assembly, "Tunisia's Constitution of 2014."

⁹² Fatmanur Ozen and Temel Topal, "The Inclusion of Social Issues in the Curricula Adopted at the Elementary Education Level in Turkey," *European Journal of Educational Research* 8, no. 1 (January 14, 2019): 361–75.

⁹³ Constituent Assembly, Art. 15

⁹⁴ Claes, Hooghe, and Stolle, "The Political Socialization of Adolescents in Canada: Differential Effects of Civic Education on Visible Minorities."

⁹⁵ Claes, Hooghe, and Stolle.

⁹⁶ Drissi, "Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition."

to their state, as well as predict the future of the health of democracy. As has been demonstrated, civic education classes in Tunisia work to support the procedural dimensions of democracy but fail to embrace fully the liberal minded perspectives embedded in the ideology. Students learn in civic education classes about the structure of their government, their national history, and about their duties and rights as a citizen.⁹⁷ With these understandings, students will learn about necessary information about how their government works and their role as an active citizen. However, these understandings only fulfill surface level needs of a healthy democracy because of their lack of support for the philosophical backings of democracy. On this topic, Mounir Kchaou wrote, “adopting democracy and proclaiming commitment to human rights and rule of law while excluding liberal principles confines democracy to a mechanism of political alternation. It denies the values and philosophy underlying the modern democracy as constitutional and representative democracy”.⁹⁸ In this way, the current construction of citizenship in Tunisian civic education classes makes it impossible for Tunisia to realize the goals of a liberal democracy.

In order for Tunisia to grow a healthy civic society with citizens who feel confident to criticize their leaders, a transparent government and an inclusive imagination of Tunisian citizenship, all of which are outlined as goals of the 2014 constitution, civic education classes need to be reoriented. Students need to be best prepared with classes that foster critical thinking skills, hands-on, active engagement with their communities, and encourage coexistence with minority populations. It is only with these shifts in pedagogy that Tunisian civic education classes will construct a truly democratic citizenship that will continue to support the aspirations

⁹⁷ Ramoun, “المدرسة في البلدان المغاربية و الخطاب حول المواطنة”.

⁹⁸ Kchaou, 5.

of democracy in Tunisia, prevent extremism and encourage the youth of tomorrow to take responsibility for their government.

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