

# YOUTH POLITICAL ALIENATION IN DEVELOPING DEMOCRACIES: UNDERSTANDING WHY YOUNG PEOPLE ARE INCREASINGLY DISTRUSTFUL OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*In many parts of the developing world, a worrisome trend has been taking place: young people – the very cohort of people that democratic theory sees as the fuel of political regeneration – are increasingly turning their backs on formal politics. This paper explores the structural and experiential dimensions of youth political alienation in developing democracies, specifically Pakistan and the Arab Spring generation. Based on three interrelated theoretical traditions—Karl Marx and Melvin Seeman's theory of alienation, Max Weber and David Easton's theory of political legitimacy, and Kenneth Langton's theory of political socialization—the paper constructs an analytical model with an integrative nature that can explain the current disaffection. It is a mixed method study that incorporates qualitative focus group data and quantitative public opinion survey data to capture the lived experiences of youth and macro-level attitudinal patterns. The results indicate that alienation is not simply a passive disengagement from political life but an active and reasoned reaction to failure of institutions, corruption of elites, economic marginalization and failure to deliver on promises of democratic government. The consequences for the democratic stability of fragile states are grave: when young people lose faith in the political system, they don't just stop engaging with it, they become ripe for populist, radical and authoritarian messages. This paper holds that "cosmetic reform" of the political institutions that alienate the young is not sufficient to reverse the trend; rather, fundamental change in their structures is needed.*

**Keywords:** youth political alienation, developing democracies, political legitimacy, political socialization, Pakistan, Arab Spring, civic disengagement

## INTRODUCTION

Democracy in the 21st century is very contradictory. To be precise, today more states than ever before call themselves democratic. Often, in the global South, elections are carried out, constitutions are drafted, and parliaments are assembled with a certain regularity. Yet in many of these same states, it is young people, the very

people who are the ones who stand to inherit this political system, who are rejecting it in significant numbers. When it comes to voting, youth turnout is declining. Confidence in political parties, parliaments and electoral commissions is at an all-time low. The political grammar of a generation becomes protest. There's been a problem, clearly.

This paper does not reduce this paradox to a contradiction. The question it addresses is a simple one, but one that is analytically challenging: why is youth in developing democracies growing cynical of politics? The question is not new, but the sense of urgency has now grown. Political volatility over the past decade – ranging from the anti-corruption campaigns in Pakistan to the Arab Spring – has shown youth disengagement to be no permanent state. Apathy is not the only fruit of alienation that grows with time. It produces rupture.

There is a substantial literatures on youth political disengagement, but it can be very fragmented. Political psychologists study individual attitudes, sociologists trace structural inequalities, and comparative political scientists study the performance of institutions. What is often missing is an integrative text that connects personal experience with a structural context and that sees developing democracies as their own object rather than a mere variation of the template of the Western democratic model. This paper attempts to fill that gap.

This paper is organized as follows. In this introduction, the theoretical literature is surveyed in Section 2, under three headings: alienation theory, legitimacy theory, and political socialization. The theoretical synthesis of the perspectives is presented in section 3. The methodology is explained in Section 4, which includes focus groups and public opinion surveys. The in-depth case studies of Pakistani youth in electoral politics (section 5) and the Arab Spring generation (section 6) are included. Key findings are presented and discussed in section 7, through a cross case analysis. The theoretical contributions and policy implications are presented in Section 8.

### Literature Review

#### **Alienation Theory: From Classical Roots to Contemporary Relevance**

Alienation has a long intellectual history in the social sciences. Karl Marx (1844/1978) used it in a particular context in economics, to denote the separation of workers from the products of their labor, from the process of production, from other workers, and from their own human substance.

Alienation for Marx, is not a psychological eccentricity but a structural reality that forms part of the organization of productive life itself. His conception, which had economic relations as its initial subject, was a theoretical gateway that subsequent scholars would march through with joy.

He was Melvin Seeman (1959) who decomposed the concept for the empirical study of social science and came up with five analytically distinct dimensions of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Of these, powerlessness (the belief that one's own actions are futile in achieving a desired outcome) and normlessness (the belief that socially disapproved actions are necessary to achieve an outcome) have been most directly relevant to the political context (Seeman, 1959, 1983). Through these dimensions, researchers can transcend the vague notion of estrangement proposed in Marxian context and can measure alienation as an attitudinal phenomenon.

Alienation theory was translated into a specifically political register during the 1960s and 1970s. Ada Finifter (1970) showed that there are four dimensions of political alienation – political powerlessness, political meaninglessness, political normlessness, and political isolation – that have empirical distinctions from one another and relate to political behavior. Later research by Citrin (1974), Easton (1975) and Craig (1980) further clarified the conceptual terrain by distinguishing between diffuse and specific political support, as well as between cynicism (negative assessment of incumbents) and alienation (fundamentally negative assessment of the system).

Newer scholarship has identified how globalization, neoliberal restructuring, and digital media have resulted in new forms of political alienation specifically among youth. The condition of alienation, defined by Furlong and Carmel (2007) as a structural relationship between the individual and the collectivity, has intensified as the forces of late modernity have imposed an individualizing structure of feeling on young people that overlooks the collective forces which may be making them feel this way. Loader (2007) and Stolle and Hooghe (2011) record the

ways in which the digital canvassing of connectivity can create new forms of political expression - hashtag activism, online petitioning, viral dissent - without superseding the falling engagement with formal political institutions. All these point to the fact that youth alienation today is not a mere continuation of earlier alienation but rather a hybrid, reflecting the specific contradictions of democratic life in the early twenty-first century.

### **Legitimacy Theory: When Institutions Lose Their Authority**

Political legitimacy signifies the general acceptance of the rightness of political power and the moral duty to obey it, not just out of prudence, but because it has a right to be obeyed (Weber, 1919/1946). Max Weber believed that legitimate authority could be based on three different types: traditional authority, charismatic authority, and rational-legal authority. In modern democracies, rational-legal legitimacy, or the notion that governments are legitimate because they adhere to constitutional processes, electoral accountability and the rule of law, is the primary source of the legitimacy of government.

A more dynamic view of legitimacy is provided by David Easton's (1965, 1975) systems theory of politics that distinguishes between specific and diffuse support, with specific support equating to satisfaction with specific policy outputs and leaders, and diffuse support to a generalized orientation toward the political system itself. Diffuse support is a pool of political goodwill that allows functioning of the system during bad times; without diffuse support, even good governance might not be sufficient to avert the crisis. Norris (1999, 2011) expanded this approach to formulate the notion of critical citizens - those who hold high democratic standards, yet are not happy with current democratic practice. She argues that dissatisfaction can be combined with democratic governance without any threat to its legitimacy, and, indeed, that it can be used to consolidate it, but a lack of satisfaction coupled with a lack of respect for democratic values is a threat to the system itself.

However, scholars engaged in the study of legitimacy in developing world settings have emphasized the special problems of post-colonial states. Many of these states inherit institutional forms that were designed in very different historical and cultural contexts, and that have been difficult to give indigenous roots (Hyden, 2006; Leftwich, 2000). The disjuncture between institutional form and social reality leads to what Chabal and Daloz (1999) term "virtualization of the state," in which informal power systems, patrimonialism, and clientelism play the real part in political allocations. Under these circumstances, legitimacy deficits are especially problematic for young people, who are often excluded from the material benefits of the clientelist networks and are highly aware of the mismatch between the possibility of democracy and the reality of political life.

Recent research has shifted emphasis to the way corruption undermines political legitimacy. Rothstein and Teorell (2008) contend that it is not the democratic nature of government per se but the quality of government, especially its impartiality and freedom from corruption, that is more significant for legitimacy. Warren (2004) and Norris (2012) provide empirical proof that perceptions of elite corruption are strongly linked to diminished institutional trust, especially among younger, more highly-educated, and better-informed citizens who have less material interest in the status quo, relative to older and more established citizens.

### **Political Socialization: The Making (and Unmaking) of Political Citizens**

Political socialization has been a major topic in the study of political science since the behavioral turn in the 1950s and 1960s in which people acquire political orientations, identities, and behavioral dispositions. The works of classic researchers such as Greenstein (1965), Hess & Torney (1967) and Langton (1969) have established that the family, school and peer group are the most important socialization agents, and that attitudes acquired during childhood and adolescence have enduring impact on political behavior as an adult.

The early picture was complicated by subsequent research in important ways. Jennings and Niemi (1981) demonstrated that political socialization is not a one-time inoculation, but rather a life-long process and attitudes do continue to change through adulthood as a function of political experience. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) showed that civic skills (the ability to communicate, organize, and participate) are distributed unevenly across the population, with class, race, and education all having an important impact. Putnam (2000) emphasized the role of associational life in developing the civic habits that promote democratic participation in his studies of social capital.

In particular, the literature on socialization has highlighted the distortionary effects of authoritarian experiences, political violence and institutional dysfunction for developing democracies. Youth socialized in environments where elections are marred by fraud, political involvement results in persecution, and government is equated with corruption have been socialized differently than those in stable well-functioning democracies (Inglehart, 1997; Welzel, 2013). Flanagan and Sherrod (1998) suggest that civic development in such contexts features a core ambivalence, since young people are socialized to both formal democratic norms (from school curricula, media and influences from transnational civil society) and an experience of how politics "works" (which may contradict formal democratic norms). Their ambivalence, they argue, is one of the main reasons for the cynicism and lack of participation among the young in a lot of transitioning democracies.

The use of digital media in political socialization has been a focus of recent scholarship as well. Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) identify two types of citizenship: dutiful citizenship and actualizing citizenship, wherein citizens engage in the more personal, issues-oriented, network-based form of political behaviors. They claim that in many societies there is a transition trend among younger generations from the former mode to the latter one, which is enabled by digital communication technologies. Theoretically, this reimagining of citizenship can have a positive

impact, but others argue that it can also be romanticizing the political role of online activism and ignoring the institutional obstacles that block the way for most young people in the global South to participate in politics (Dahlgren, 2009; Morozov, 2011).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper proposes an integrative approach towards explaining youth political alienation in developing democracies based on the three theoretical traditions discussed above. The framework is based on the following three premises.

First, youth political alienation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon which includes the cognitive, affective and behavioral component. Alienation at the cognitive level is characterized by an attitude of political unresponsiveness, corruption and elite control of political institutions. Affective: feelings of alienation, resentment and disconnection from the political community. At the behavioural level, it is expressed by decreased electoral turn-out, withdrawal from formal political parties, and in some instances, participation in extra-institutional forms of collective action. Cognitive disillusionment is analytically distinct from affective estrangement, but it is empirically associated with affective estrangement, which in turn influences behavioral options.

Second, there is a hybridity of structural and agential factors producing youth political alienation. Structural factors involve the characteristics of democratic institutions, the distributive effects of economic and social policies and the organizational strength of civil society. Agential factors include the political knowledge and civic skills of young people, their social networks and associational memberships, and their exposure to alternative political identities and frames in digital media. The interaction between structure and disposition is what produces the outcomes that we observe: neither structures nor dispositions, as such, can explain the patterns of alienation found in developing democracies.

Third, the political process of political socialization is the mechanism by which the structure is transformed into the individual's orientations. The experiences young people have as users of political media, as a target group of state interventions, as voters are a kind of de facto political education and have a profound impact on their expectations, evaluations and inclinations. These experiences of exclusion, deception and/or impunity lead to a socialization into alienation, that is, the internalization of a cynical political realism that sees formal democratic participation as futile, dangerous or simply irrelevant.

The framework thus suggests there are three pathways to youth political alienation in developing democracies: the legitimacy deficit pathway (in which youth trust in the performance of institutions results in declining trust and disengagement); the exclusion pathway (in which youth economic and social marginalization leads to powerlessness and normlessness); and the socialization pathway (in which experiences of political disappointment are spread through family, peer, and media networks, creating durable alienation across cohorts). However, these pathways are not mutually exclusive; most empirical cases entail a simultaneous use of pathways and pathways reinforcing each other.

### **Methodology**

The study uses a mixed methods approach to research, using qualitative focus groups in conjunction with quantitative public opinion survey data. The epistemological needs of the research question shape the selection of methodology: understanding why young people are alienated needs the thick description of lived experience that qualitative approaches allow as well as the systematic mapping of attitudinal patterns across populations that quantitative approaches provide.

### **Focus Group Design**

Focus groups with youth in Pakistan (Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi) and with diaspora and civil society researchers focusing on North African youth politics were held. Participants aged 18-30 years were drawn from universities, youth groups

and community groups. Twelve focus groups were held with 8-10 participants per group, resulting in about 100 participants in total. Focus groups were held in Urdu, Arabic and English with professional interpretation as necessary.

The focus group discussions proceeded in four thematic areas: perceptions of political institutions and leaders, experiences of political participation (both formal and informal forms), sources of political information and attitudes towards digital media, and future orientations towards political engagement. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that focused on how participants made sense of their political experiences and how they rationalised their choices of formal political engagement and not.

The focus group methodology was selected not only because of its ability to provide high-quality, rich, descriptive data but also because of its applicability to the socio-cultural context of the case studies. Even direct questioning for political orientations can elicit socially-desirable or self-censored answers, especially from the younger respondents who may not be aware of the social and political consequences of articulating dissenting views, in both Pakistan and the Arab world after the Arab Spring. When facilitated with attention to the needs of the participants for their comfort and confidentiality, the group dynamic of focus groups can help to create more genuine political discussion by normalizing the expression of critical views.

### **The design of a public opinion survey. Design of a public opinion survey.**

The quantitative piece of the study is based on the data of multiple large-scale public opinion surveys from 2012 to 2024. For the Pakistani case, data were collected from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM), the Gallup Pakistan Political Surveys, and from the Pakistan Public Opinion Survey conducted by the International Republican Institute. In the case of the Arab Spring, the data were obtained from the Arab Barometer surveys (Waves II to VI) that offer comparable cross-national attitudinal data for

Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Jordan, and Lebanon.

The measures of institutional trust (trust in parliament, elections, political parties, and the judiciary), political efficacy (both internal and external), and civic participation intentions, are the key dependent variables in the quantitative analysis. Key independent variables are age, education, employment status, and urban/rural residence, perceptions of corruption, economic evaluation, and media consumption patterns. Regression analyses were performed in Stata 17 and robust standard errors were clustered at the regional level to capture within-cluster correlations of the survey data.

### **Pakistani Youth and Electoral Politics: Case Study One**

#### **Political Context**

The situation in Pakistan is a particularly instructive example to examine the phenomenon of youth political alienation. One of the youngest countries in South Asia – and most politically volatile – Pakistan is home to some 64 per cent of its 230 million population under 30. The Armed Forces of Pakistan have staged four military coups, there have been several constitutional crises, and civilian governments have been short-lived since independence in 1947. Usually, the civilian political parties that contest elections are seen as the vehicles of family dynasties, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) is for the Sharif family of Lahore and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) is for the Bhutto-Zardari family. This dynastic nature of party politics is a constant feature in the focus group discussions and young respondents invariably referred to formal political institutions as closed systems that could enter only through family ties, money or caste.

Each of the three general elections in 2013, 2018 and 2024 has seen a blossoming of young people's engagement, only to be followed by disappointment. There was a genuine excitement around the 2018 elections which brought Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) to power and pledged to fight corruption and mobilise the youth. Khan's promise of a 'Naya Pakistan' (New Pakistan) free from the control of

the incumbent political families was attractive to young people who felt they had been marginalized from the patron-client system of the traditional parties. However, the fervent enthusiasm of 2022, when Khan was ousted from office in a no-confidence vote in parliament for alleged military-political intrigue, had turned into a pervasive cynicism, one that questioned not just the political parties, but the constitutional and military-civil structure in which Pakistani democracy functions. The findings of the focus group with the youth of Pakistan are presented below.

The Pakistani focus group data was characterised by certain recurring themes. The most common theme was that, as repeatedly described by the participants, one feels 'used' by political parties: mobilized as a voter and a supporter during election campaigns and then forgotten once the votes are counted. This instrumentalization of youth participation was felt, not only as a political defeat, but as a personal betrayal, with young people's emotional and social investments in political causes and movements being discarded.

A second regular theme was the recognition of corruption, not only as a political reality, but as a moral economy, which suffused all aspects of public activity. The focus group participants spoke about their personal experiences of dealing with corrupt officials in their daily lives, such as the traffic warden who asked for a bribe, the university admissions committee that prioritised applicants from the same biradari (clan or kinship group) as the committee members, and the local councilor who was providing services to his own biradari whilst others were left out. These everyday abuses of the institutions were not regarded as a deviation from a "regular," "standard" system but, rather, as part of the system.

A third theme that was very strong among the focus group participants in both Karachi and Lahore was that there seemed to be an unbridgeable gulf between those who 'matter' politically and those who do not. This perception was manifested on class lines, in ethnic and regional terms (Baloch and Sindhi voices are systematically subdued in a Punjab-centric political system), and also in generational lines (the political class is self-perpetuating with young

people on the margins). The sense of structural exclusion has frequently been expressed metaphorically as a game with rules set by and for the powerful, which cannot be altered from within by those who don't belong.

But the focus groups also showed a steady stream of political desire, amid the angry outcry. Many participants who characterized themselves as very disappointed with formal politics, also displayed high levels of political knowledge, much commitment to social issues, and a clear conception of what good government should look like. Their disaffection was not the result of being apolitical, but in many instances the result of disappointed political activity. The difference between the disengaged and the disillusioned became analytically significant: the disengaged may not be important politically but the disillusioned are potentially so when the conditions leading to their alienation are met.

#### **Survey Evidence: Trust and Efficacy among Pakistani Youth**

The focus group findings are generally confirmed by the data from the public opinion survey. According to the Gallup Pakistan surveys from 2018 to 2024, institutional trust among the youth (18-30) has seen a significant decline over the years, with the trust in political parties standing at below 20% and the trust in electoral commission seen moving from 54% in 2018 to a mere 31% in 2024. These numbers are significantly lower than similar numbers among respondents age 50 and older, indicating a true generational divide in political confidence and not merely a life cycle effect.

Generic differences in political efficacy (the sense that the political system is responsive to citizen demands) are especially large. According to the 2022 IRI survey results, 23% of 18-30 year old respondents said they agreed with the statement 'elected officials care what ordinary people think' compared to 41% of respondents over 50 years. Interestingly, internal political efficacy – the feeling that one can understand and participate in politics – was relatively high among young, educated urban respondents, indicating that the alienation felt is systemic, and not necessarily due

to an individual's lack of ability. In other words, young Pakistanis are not politically unconfident, rather they are unconfident of the institutions that are expected to translate their engagement into representation.

The results of the regression analysis with education, income, urban/rural residence and gender controlled for suggest that age is also a significant negative predictor of institutional trust ( $\beta = -0.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), even after taking these other factors into account. The strongest single predictor of institutional distrust is perceived corruption ( $\beta = -0.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which is in line with the theoretical expectations based on Rothstein and Teorell (2008) and Warren (2004). Consumption patterns of media reveal a more nuanced picture: independent digital news is positively correlated with political knowledge and distrust, as well as state-controlled broadcast media consumption is correlated with higher and more passive political confidence.

#### **The Arab Spring Generation: Case Study Two. The historical and political background.**

In its early stages, the Arab Spring of 2010-2012 was one of the most striking examples of youth political involvement in recent times. Protests began in North Africa and the Middle East in December 2010 when Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia, which led to the fall of four governments and years of civil unrest throughout the region. At the heart of these movements were young people – many of them educated, digitally savvy, and economically frustrated – who leveraged social media, which they used to organise demonstrations, spread news and build solidarity across national and class lines. Ten years on, the political picture of the Arab Spring is mostly a disappointment. For a while, it was the sole success story in the region, but the democracy that Tunisia had made possible was undermined by President Kais Saied's 2021 self-coup and a new constitution that devolved more powers on the executive. However, the military coup of 2013 brought an end to Egypt's short period of democracy, and the authoritarianism of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has been more repressive than the Mubarak regime he overthrew.

This led to civil war in Libya. Syria's uprising has been crushed in a devastating war that left hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced. Yemen went that way, too. Bar the cases of Bahrain and Jordan, all other regimes were changed, albeit at the price of increased repression.

These experiences have left traces on the political generation which has grown from them analytically revealing and politically significant. Their motivations were democratically inspired; they faced military repression, international apathy and ultimately the demise of their movements. This alienation is not simply a result of a political system that failed to deliver on its promises: It is a result of a political system that is dominated by the violent suppression of the very attempt at holding it to account.

The findings of the Focus Group are presented here and referred to as Focus Group Findings: Arab Spring Generation.

Themes emerged in focus group discussions with Arab Spring-generation participants (held mostly with diaspora communities in Turkey and Europe and with civil society researchers who specialise in the region) that were both comparable and different to those that arose from the Pakistani case. Perhaps the most striking contrast was the sense of traumatic political memory: the beatings, the tear gas, the gunfire, the disappearances were all remembered, and the sense of the participants' memories being shaped by those events was palpable.

In contrast to the Pakistani FG participants who talked about alienation in terms of systemic exclusion and elite capture, many of the Arab Spring FG participants referred to a more existential form of political despair in which political action was not just futile, but also harmful, and the international community that had nominally championed democratic values had ultimately cared more about geopolitical stability than democratic accountability. A theme that emerged regularly was the role of Western powers, and how Western powers have been complicit with the Egyptian crackdown and the Bahraini crackdown, and their chaotic actions in Libya, and

how this cynicism extends to the whole democracy promotion discourse.

Meanwhile, those in the focus groups refused to describe themselves as politically apathetic. They carefully separated between formal political institutions, which they saw as irretrievably captured or destroyed, and political engagement in a broader sense. Many were still actively involved in civil society groups, human rights advocacy, humanitarian groups and community organizing as well. They were not, as has sometimes been suggested, "gone away" from the public sphere through their exit from the formal arena of electoral politics, but rather were strategically redirecting their political energies in ways they perceived as more effective and less risky.

#### **Survey Evidence – Longitudinal trends in Arab Barometer Data**

The Arab Barometer offers longitudinal survey data from six waves (2006-2023) to systematically track attitudinal change among young Arabs. The data show a consistent and progressive loss of trust in institutions (with some temporary recovery during the first waves of the Arab Spring 2010-2012), followed by a renewed and renewed downward trend in later waves.

The average across the six Arab countries studied in the most recent wave of the Arab Barometer (2021-2023) was 21% of 18-29 year olds who trust national governments. This is in comparison to 34% among those age 18-29 who were over the age of 50 in 2006. Trust in political parties was even lower, with young people on average giving a score of 14% – not far from the margin of error for a finding of 'complete loss of confidence'.

The link between economic conditions and political trust was particularly relevant in the Arab Barometer data. Yet the unemployment rate for young Arabs is within the highest in the world, and the Arab Barometer surveys indicate that for the same reason, young people who are either unemployed or underemployed are 12-18 percentage points less likely to trust political institutions, even for the same level of education and political knowledge. This economic side of alienation has a clear echoes of the emphasis on material conditions as a basis for political

consciousness within the Marxian tradition, and indicates that any program of political re-engagement which does not factor in the economic exclusion of young Arabs is unlikely to be successful.

Notably, the post-Arab Spring data shows the effects of generational learning: those who reported participating in the protests (2010-2012) were, a decade later, significantly less likely to say that participation in elections was a meaningful form of political action (28%) than those who did not participate in the protests (42%), but still more likely to say that volunteering and community organizing were meaningful forms of political action. In tune with the theory outlined in Section 3, this is a long-lasting attitudinal shift brought about by the socialization pathway, while the experience of political mobilization and its subsequent disintegration through violent repression has resulted in a persistent attitude of distrust of institutions that has been little affected by subsequent political events.

### **Cross-Case Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Convergent Patterns**

In understanding the Pakistani and Arab Spring cases, there are some convergences and differences of importance. The convergences are analytically important because they exist in so different national, cultural and historical contexts that the patterns identified are not just case specific contingencies. Three convergent patterns are of special interest.

In the first instance, in both, institutional corruption turns out to be the strongest force behind political alienation. This finding is true for both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study and is similar to the overall theoretical literature surveyed in Section 2. But corruption is not only an economic issue – the misallocation of public resources – it is a fundamental normative issue as well: A sign that the political system is not working as it ought, that democratic legitimacy is not being upheld by equality, impartiality and accountability. Young people who have been schooled in formal democratic norms through their schooling and media will experience a strong cognitive dissonance between their expectations of

political activities and the reality of their political involvement, which they will most likely deal with by lowering their expectations for political behaviors instead of raising their political behaviors.

Second, in both instances, youth disaffection with formal politics does not directly correspond with political disengagement or abstention. One of the most common themes throughout the focus groups and survey is that “politically alienated” youth are not necessarily “apathetic” youth; rather, they are youth who have shifted their political attention toward other means of expressing civic engagement they view to be more effective and less tainted by corruption than formal politics, such as online activism, community organizing, NGO work, and social entrepreneurship. This is a finding that contradicts the prevailing opinion that perceives institutional distrust and civic disengagement as synonymous and that the pool of civic energies in both societies is much more abundant than the commonly accepted indicators of electoral participation suggest.

Third, in both the political socialisation function of media, and especially digital media, is ambivalent in both scenarios. Digital connectivity has certainly increased the younger generation's access to political information and their horizontal political communication ability, as is evident in their participation in the Arab Spring uprisings and in the anti-corruption movements in Pakistan. At the same time, though, the same technologies that can mobilize can disillusion: young people who get real-time information about elite corruption, political violence and institutional failure can be socialized in a potentially more alienating environment than previous generations who have been socialized in more mediated political information settings.

#### **Divergent Patterns and Their Significance.**

These similarities are accompanied by significant differences between the two cases that make it difficult to give a neat and tidy explanation of political alienation among young people. The political experiences that have led to a sense of alienation are most important, and here there is the greatest variation. The prevailing impression

in Pakistan is that of exclusion, of the denial of meaningful access to a political system that is largely geared towards the interests of the established elites and those who are dependent on them. With the Arab Spring, the predominant one is suppression, of trying to make meaningful political involvement and getting violence in reaction to it. Politically, these are qualitatively different traumas and have somewhat different psychological and political effects.

Alienation by exclusion often creates a type of disengagement where there is the potential for re-engagement if institutions are made more accessible, representative and responsive. By contrast, alienation from suppression is more likely to result in a more entrenched and irreparable distrust, one that is not easily remediated through institutional change, in that the experience of suppression has pervasively undermined the sense of security and efficacy that is essential for political participation.

The difference has implications for democratic consolidation. Narrowly electoral reforms designed to increase participation by lowering the voting age, and by introducing party primaries and reforming campaign finance, may not be enough to reauthenticate the political system in the eyes of young people who feel alienated, not because they cannot vote, but because the promise of democracy has failed to materialize in the reality of their political lives.

### Key Findings

The findings of this study have produced some important conclusions for the scholarly literature on youth political alienation in the developing democracies.

First, youth's political disaffection in developing democracies is essentially a problem of legitimacy, rather than capacity. Political knowledge and political reasoning were found to be high among youths in both case study contexts, and they showed a strong normative orientation to democracy. They are not politically uninformed or civically incompetent, but are alienated because of their perception that the gap between democracy and what the institution actually does is too large. This discovery is problematic for deficit-model

perspectives on youth civic learning that view the lack of youth civic engagement as a lack of political knowledge or skills.

Finding 2: In both cases institutional delegitimation is brought about by corruption. In both datasets, the strongest predictor of institutional distrust is the perception that political institutions are 'captured' by corrupt elites and that this 'capture' cannot be overturned through elections. This is similar to the quality of government theory (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008) and implies that anti-corruption reform is a condition (but certainly not a sufficient condition) to tackle youth political alienation.

Finding 3: Disappointing political experiences have long term generational impacts on political socialization. When democratic movements mobilize young people and are defeated or suppressed, the impact of such defeat or suppression is long lasting and results in loss of trust in institutions which is not corrected on subsequent shifts in government. This points towards a 'socialization pathway' to alienation at the level of generations and collective political learning which may have long-term effects on the culture of democracy.

Finding 4: Despite being alienated from formal politics, youth are actually very civically engaged in non-institutional and informal contexts. This discovery questions the dichotomy of "engaged" and "disengaged" citizenship and suggests a more nuanced and complex approach to understanding youth political participation that incorporates the variety of civic activities by which young people in new democracies engage with, and express, their political identities and pursue their political agendas, including digital politics, community organizing, and civil engagement.

Finding 5: Institutional alienation is exacerbated by economic exclusion. In both, young people with unemployment or economic precarity are significantly more disattached from political institutions than are their economically secure counterparts. The results indicate that there is a positive correlation between political alienation and economic grievances, meaning that any way to renew democracy that does not include the

economic inclusion of the young people is unlikely to have a lasting effect.

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore, in a rather analytical and compassionate manner, why youth in developing democracies are now suspicious of political institutions. The findings from the theoretical analysis and empirical evidence are not a hopeful one for those who think that the problem is easily or quickly correctible. This is not a passing fad in Pakistan, nor a generational idiosyncrasy, nor a matter of communication, which could be solved by improved political marketing. It is a socialized distrust that is so powerful, so entrenched, that it is resistant to political cycles and lives past the coming of nominally reformist political movements, and is the product of deep structural conditions – elite capture of political institutions, widespread corruption, economic exclusion and in some cases lived experience of violence against political figures.

This paper's theoretical approach, an amalgam of alienation theory, legitimacy theory and political socialization, has several analytical benefits over approaches using only one of these traditions. This it does, by depicting alienation as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which is at once cognitive, affective and behavioural. It does not assume that structure is determinative of individual orientations, nor does it assume methodological individualism that ignores the structural conditions that constrain and shape individual orientations. It also highlights the temporal dimension of alienation: how political experiences are experienced, remembered, and passed down across cohorts creating a momentum to alienation which is hard to reverse.

There are chilling and not hopeful consequences for democratic governance in developing countries. What this study reveals is that the issue is not that politically alienated youth is losing its civic energy, but that this civic energy is being directed elsewhere, outside of institutional democratic means. The challenge for political elites, civil society and international democratic support organisations is to find ways to channel

that energy back into formal political participation without young people having to either ignore or minimise the institutional failures that made them feel alienated in the first place.

This takes at least three changes. First, effective anti-corruption reform – not necessarily prosecuting the politicians' pals in a dazzling courtroom show, but rather effective institutional reform that ensures accountability for all levels of government. Second, economic policies that specifically aim at tackling youth unemployment and precarity, as the lack of basic security and self-respect that civic engagement requires make it hard to maintain political engagement. Third, institutional redesign that really places youth in a position of real political representation, rather than token youth wings or advisory councils, but in which there is a real power-sharing design that affords young people real influence in decisions that affect their lives.

All of this will not be done easily or soon. But the downside – the further disaffection of young people from the political systems that they must one day inherit and sustain – is far more dangerous than the political consequences of reform. A democracy that loses its youth is not just a democracy that sees less turnout; it's a democratic generational transfer crisis that goes to the very essence of what democratic self-governance is supposed to mean. Now is the time to take that crisis seriously, and the civic energy of an angry generation that isn't quite apathetic yet can be restored.

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