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Thierry Desrues, Éric Gobe

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Protest campaigns in Tunisia during the first democratic legislature (2014-19): a cultural turn and the limitations of a new generation of activists

Campañas de protestas en Túnez durante la primera legislatura democrática (2014-19): el cambio cultural y las limitaciones de una nueva generación de activistas

Thierry DESRUES,

Institute for Advanced Social Studies, Spanish National Research Council (IESA,CSIC), Córdoba, Spain.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7097-405X>

tdesrues@iesa.csic.es (Corresponding author)

Éric GOBE,

Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS, IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence, France.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1976-2983>

jbheuman@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyses the cultural turn in youth activism in Tunisia, expressed in a series of protest campaigns during the first legislature of the post revolution democratic parliamentary experiment. Based in interviews, we first present the specificity of campaigns as a repertoire for protest actions. Secondly, we describe how a new generation of young activists challenged government decisions. Thirdly, we show that these mobilisations are mostly ad hoc and driven by micro-networks of left-wing activists who champion a new protest culture based internally on the horizontality of participation and decision-making; and externally on the use of innovative performances within a classical repertoire of action.

Keywords

Arab Spring, Mobilisations, Social Movements, Youth Activism, Tunisia.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el giro cultural del activismo juvenil en Túnez, expresado en una serie de campañas de protesta durante la primera legislatura del régimen de democracia parlamentaria. Basándonos en entrevistas, presentamos primero, la especificidad de las campañas como repertorio de acciones de protesta; luego,

describimos cómo una nueva generación de jóvenes activistas desafió las decisiones del gobierno; y, por último, mostramos que son movilizaciones en su mayoría ad hoc e impulsadas por micro-redes de activistas de izquierdas que defienden una nueva cultura de protesta basada internamente en la horizontalidad de la participación y la toma de decisiones, y, externamente en actuaciones innovadoras dentro de un repertorio clásico de acción.

Palabras clave

Primavera árabe, movilizaciones, movimientos sociales, activismo juvenil, Túnez.

Introduction

“The Tunisian revolution belongs to the youth” declared – in 2011, before his colleagues of the High Instance for the realization of the revolution objectives, the political reform and the democratic transition (HIROR) – Fadhel Bettahar, one of the regions’ representatives to this institution¹. Without commenting on this statement’s merits, clearly the Tunisian “youth” was perceived by Tunisia’s “official”, “democratic transition” political actors as the spearhead of the winter 2010-2011 revolution². This assertion has participated in the creation of a revolutionary imaginary in which young demonstrators would have, without leaders, driven out dictator Ben Ali – before it was betrayed by the political elites, who have hijacked the revolutionary energy to their own benefit.

In 2015, following octogenarian Beji Caid Essebsi’s accession as president of the Republic, young people – disappointed by the results of the 2014 legislative and presidential elections, and by the place left for them by political parties – seized upon this leitmotif to take the initiative of protest campaigns, combining online activity and physical presence in offline collective actions. These young people – mainly from the urban middle classes, progressive and university educated – found in the protest campaigns a way of expressing their desire to constitute a new political generation, breaking with previous activist generations and able to reactivate the revolutionary period’s protest dynamics. In this sense, we suggest their actions, praxis and discourses can be considered as the embodiment of a specific identity peculiar to a new generation of activists.

We believe the combination of a generational approach – articulating the concepts of political generation and “juvenile condition”³ with an analysis of the campaign’s characteristics as a flexible mobilization mode – is particularly well-suited to the organization in young left-wing activists’ interconnected micro-networks, often coming from student activism⁴. That is why it is particularly heuristic to understand both the appeal of this action repertoire provided by campaigns among these young people, as well as the engagement logics and the meanings they imparted to it.

In this article, we address this phenomenon by analysing media coverage, the sociological literature report and the narrative of a sample of activists who played a

¹ Compendium of HIROR debates (in Arabic), March 31, 2011 session, Tunisian Republic, 2012. This body, created by the February 18, 2011 decree-law, was composed of appointed members, supposed to represent Tunisian society’s main political currents and forces. It was mainly in charge of drafting electoral legislation allowing the Tunisian people to express their sovereign will through the election of a constituent National Assembly.

² The 2014 constitution dedicates its article 8 to youth: “Youth is an active force in the construction of the homeland. The State shall ensure conditions conducive to developing the youth’s capabilities and implementing its potential. It encourages young people to assume their responsibilities and expand their contribution to social, economic, cultural and political development.” See Thierry Desrues and Ana Velasco Arranz (2021).

³ With regard to the situation of young people in Tunisia during the decade 2010-2020, see Thierry Desrues and Marta Garcia De Paredes (2019).

⁴ Moutaa Amine Elwaer (2019) *The ‘Manich Msamah’ campaign in Tunisia, between specific mobilization and a political form* [Hamla ‘manich msamah’ fî tûnis bayna al-ta’bi’a al-zarfiyya wa al-tashakul al-siyasi], In : Malek Sghriri et al. *The Tunisian Left Towards New Horizons?* [al-Yasâr al-Tûnisî nahw Afâq Jadîda?], (Tunis ; Nachaz, mots passants), pp. 83-87.

leading role in the actions carried out during three of the main protest campaigns that marked Tunisia's history during the first democratic legislature, from 2014 to 2019.

In order to understand both the appeal this repertoire of action offered to young people by the campaigns, as well as the commitment logics and the meanings they confer upon it, we have opted for a cultural approach (Jasper, 1997) that does not forego the insights of more structuralist theories (Volpi and Jasper, 2018). This is reflected, on the one hand, in a qualitative approach that pays close attention to activists' discourse and practices, with a view to tracing the genealogy of mobilisations; and, on the other, in the combination of a generational approach and an analysis of the campaign characteristics. By combining the cultural turn and approaches to the politics of conflict, we intend to draw attention to aspects that are often neglected in the study of mobilisations, such as the long-term nature of the relationships promoted by activist micro-networks with diverse militant affiliations; the micro-practices that make sense and unite them around more or less one-off actions; and the framing of injustice and outrage as emotional responses by actors that give rise to the apparent spontaneity of mobilisations. In so doing, the article seeks to advance the development of a research agenda that is sensitive to the cultural shift and the new identity processes that enable the interaction that produces activist networks, mobilisations and generational gaps.

We hypothesise that the 2010-2011 revolutionary situation prompted the various cohorts of young individuals – (born between 1980 and 1995), who have become involved in the campaigns – to form a tangible group within a generation. In so doing, in Mannheim's terminology (1952/1972), these young people constituted a "generational unit", that is, individuals who indeed shared common experiences and destinies and defined themselves in terms of a "common generational category" with a "generational consciousness" (Edmunds and Turner, 2002). This "generational consciousness" was all the keener as this militant youth felt they were revolutionaries treated as "minors" by the "old" intellectual and political elites of the left, "insufficiently mature and incapable of producing political thought and organization worthy of the name" (Sghriri, 2019).

Based on this approach in terms of socio-political generations, we will focus more specifically on how this left-wing youth seized this specific repertoire of action – protest campaigns – to challenge post-Ben Ali political power. We will argue here that, by resorting to this form of mobilisation, numerically very small micro-networks (a few dozen activists) reacted to specific one-off public decisions but without defining global medium- and long-term strategic objectives (Ben Youssef, 2019: 30).

To support this reasoning, we will revisit, firstly, the specific feature of campaigns as a protest action repertoire and its appeal to a renewed form of activism. Secondly, we will present the way the revolutionary moment articulated this political generation and prompted it to seize new participation forms and, consequently, to engage in protest campaigns. Thirdly, we will describe three campaigns dynamics, namely *Manich Msamah* (I will not forgive!), *Fech Nestanaw* (What are we waiting for?) and *Hasebhoum* (Let them be accountable!), focusing on the most significant of them,

Manich Msamah (I will not forgive!)⁵. Finally, in the fourth part, we will look at how core activists turned campaigns into arenas for experimenting with horizontality and how they infused a playful political iconography – a classical action repertoire.

At methodological level, this research is based on semi-structured individual interviews aiming at reconstructing the biographical itineraries of 16 (six men and ten women) activists who were members of the campaign's militant nuclei. We focus on the core group of activists, the members of the campaign "steering committees" who defined the campaigns' strategy and decided on the terms and conditions of their actions. Depending on the campaign, their number varied between 20 and 50 members (see below, the description of the campaigns). As a result, we did not survey supporters or those who took part in demonstrations in response to appeals launched by the campaigns' Facebook pages. Interviews were conducted between November and December 2021 (except for two activists). Respondents were part of successive cohorts and, as a result, stood at different points in their activist careers: ten were born in the 1990s and six in the 1980s. This cohort approach from micro-cohorts – which may consist of those who enter a movement within as short as a one-year timeframe, to multi-year or even decade-long cohorts (Whittier, 1997) – provides a tool for understanding how new participants incrementally contributed to the protest movements transformation. All respondents were part of the activist core of at least one of the three campaigns we analyse. Finally, the research complies with the ethics of confidentiality and informed consent, guaranteeing interviewees' anonymity because most of them requested it. That is why the names provided in the text are fictitious for anonymous purposes.

From social movement campaigns to *ad hoc* campaigns: autonomous activists' networks mobilization and the construction of a specific identity

Campaigns are probably among the most studied protest episodes in the social movement's sociology (Staggenborg and Lecomte, 2009). Indeed, the latter need campaigns to exist. Either they were born in the wake of a campaign, or they periodically engaged in protest campaigns in order to revitalize themselves and simply exist. To speak of a social movement implies the existence of a sustained conflict over time, a shared identity, and a "community" or "base" (complete with its organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities) (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). However, campaigns are not always social movement campaigns. Campaigns are indeed conflictual episodes that reactivate protest cycles and renew activist flows within social movements (Whittier, 1997). But, unlike social movements, they can take the form of one-off conflict episodes with specific objectives of varying duration (from one week to several years)⁶, but lacking a community or social movement base. This is the case of the conflict episodes studied in this article: they all refer to *ad hoc* protest campaigns

⁵. We have chosen to focus on these three campaigns because they were the first to link virtual activities on social networks with actions on the ground.

⁶ It may come as a surprise to hear about the length of certain campaigns. But when these protest movements consist of opposing a law considered to be iniquitous, the activists only mobilize when it is being debated in Parliament in committee or in plenary session. Likewise, legislative procedures can be extremely lengthy, especially when the opponents of the laws have the opportunity to slow down or block the adoption process.

against the adoption of a piece of legislation considered to be unfair. Now, these campaigns are nonetheless privileged moments for observing protest dynamics, social problems, and the participatory and political culture at a given moment, that shape the identity of the activists (Volpi and Jasper, 2018).

In Tunisia, they have been the lens through which current forms of activism – understood here as “any form of sustained participation in collective action aimed at defending or promoting a cause” (Sawicki and Siméant, 2009)– can be understood. In fact, they were crystallizing moments of energy directed towards a specific goal for young left-wing activists, mostly residing in the capital. These campaigns were driven by hard core activists who knew each other and formed activists’ micro-networks, capable of gathering beyond their group, because they posed as autonomous individuals freed from organizational (partisan or associative) constraints. They were an opportunity to put into practice new ways of activism that have been in use elsewhere since the turn of the 2000s and are also being implemented by young people (Juris and Pleyers, 2009). In order to prevent any recuperation of the protest movement, young activists have promoted participation modalities that revive forms of direct and horizontal democracy, refusing to delegate power to individuals liable to obey instructions from elsewhere (from parties or social organizations). At the same time, the cost of entry and exit into the campaigns is relatively low for both core campaign members and for casual and sympathetic circles that join the protest movement.

These models of participation are different from those that prevailed in Tunisia twenty years ago (Weilandt, 2019). They were made possible by much greater access to university education for the urban middle class, by the development of the information and communication technologies and, since the revolution, by the freedom of opinion and demonstration (Desrues and Garcia Paredes 2019; Desrues and Velasco 2021). In this context, Web 2.0 social networks enable rapid and instantaneous conversations and greater equality and freedom of expression with a view, for instance, to organising protest demonstrations. Young people born from the mid-1980s – socialized with its instruments as they have been during their childhood or adolescence, and proficient at handling digital innovations – are at the heart of this generational break vis-à-vis their elders who had wetted their feet under Presidents Bourguiba (1957-1987) or Ben Ali (1987-2011).

Hence, campaign activists are located at the confluence of an imaginary Tunisian revolution that galvanized them, a youthful protest culture valuing reticular and horizontal forms of organization as opposed to hierarchical structures, and a period when the development of social medias enable activist networks to organize collective action, recruit support and circulate political content. All those dimensions contribute to the formation of an identity in the sense of Jasper (1997), that is an identity based on subaltern categories (youth, young women), frames (dignity, justice, accountability, etc.), favoured tactics, participation and organization (horizontality).

The “revolution” as the founding moment of new ways of participation and the political transition as the moment of disaffiliation from political parties

For all respondents, the revolutionary situation between 2010 and 2011 played a fundamental role in their future activist careers’ orientation. Even the youngest, who

did not take to the streets, viewed themselves as stakeholders in the revolution (Hmed, 2018). Joining the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET)⁷ also felt like a necessary step on starting their activist socialization as soon as they enter university.

Our sample of older activists got involved in the main episodes of the revolutionary moment that deeply shaped them. They associated them with both revolutionary hope and the rapid disillusionment caused by a “democratic transition” process that was initially monopolized by the elites of the opposition to Ben Ali’s regime – assimilated to an older generation eager to appropriate power at the expense of the younger one. Their disappointment was all the stronger because it was accompanied by widespread doubt about “radical left-wing parties’ ability to continue the revolutionary process” (Hmed 2018, 126) especially after the 2014 presidential and legislative elections that saw the return of some political and economic figures of the former regime⁸. Therefore, the contrast is obvious between the political atmosphere of the first democratic legislature of the parliament and the revolutionary effervescence that reigned in 2011⁹.

In this regard, participation in the December 2010 - January 2011 popular uprising – and especially the two successive occupations of Government Square in the Kasbah, called retrospectively the *sit-in Kasbah 1* (23-29 January 2011) and *Kasbah 2* (20 February-3 March 2011)¹⁰ constituted a founding experience for some of our activists. While Larbi, who has assumed responsibilities within the UGET and the Union of Young Communists of Tunisia (UJCT)¹¹, emphasizes the role played by the cells of the UGET and the Communist Party of Tunisian Workers (PCOT) – during the phase from December 17, 2010 to January 14, 2011 to create the link with young people in working-class areas of the cities and thus feed the protest movements¹² – he also stresses the post-January 14 institutional vacuum, which caused significant adjustments of political possibilities, especially with the emergence of popular categories in the public space. Indeed, from January to late February, the institutions (notably the Ben Ali party Constitutional and Democratic Rally and the Ministry of the Interior) partially disintegrated and “revolutionary initiatives” flourished. Zayneb¹³, a member of our sample, left on January 17 on a tour of cities in the country’s hinterland, where the most violent clashes with the security forces occurred (Sidi

⁷ The UGET is the left-wing student union, not to be confused with the Tunisian General Union of Students (UGTE) – of Islamist persuasion.

⁸ For an overview of Tunisia’s political evolution from 2014 to 2021, see (Gobe 2022a and b) and Govantes and Hernando de Larramendi (2023).

⁹ Despite the establishment of a representative parliamentary regime in 2014, Tunisia has seen, from then until 2019, at more or less regular intervals, episodes of protest originating in different regions, with different mobilisation repertoires and with a differentiated use of new communication technologies depending on the movement. For the protest movements in these post-revolutionary years that are characterised by the occupation of land or industrial production zones, we refer you to Desrues and Gobe (2023) and Hernando de Larramendi (2021).

¹⁰ See Choukri Hmed (2016) on the issues at stake in the two sit-ins. His article puts our respondents’ comments into context.

¹¹ Interview with Larbi, Carthage, November 12, 2021.

¹² Ahmed, also a member of the UJCT, develops a similar narrative about Djerba. Elwaer’s research (2017) on the UGET highlights the role of “content transmitters” and of the “political radicalization” played by UGET activists concerning the youths living in low-income neighborhoods.

¹³ Interview with Zayneb, Tunis, December 1, 2021.

Bouزيد, Kasserine, etc.). She witnessed the birth of the “caravans of freedom”, composed of radical left activists, local sections’ trade unionists and young people who organized to travel to Tunis to occupy Government Square at the Kasbah district and thus bring down the “system”. The agorae that were mushrooming were places of autonomous local level decision-making experimentation. To explain her entry into her activist career, Zayneb refers more specifically to her field experience in Thala, where the city was self-managed for a few months:

“I was witness to horizontal assemblies. Everyone was deciding what to do with the resources, addressing political issues and demands. All the elements of a horizontal assembly were there. It lasted six whole months, there were revolution protection committees, it was the politicized left-wing youth, etc. The police had disappeared, and the Thala people organized themselves horizontally”.

Larbi regards his experience of the Kasbah sit-ins as a key moment in his trajectory:

“We started talking about horizontality, decentralization and collective intelligence. It was the young people who talked about this, those who had been through the experience of the revolution protection committees, those who had experienced citizen self-organization [...]. It was the soul of the revolution”.

It is this experience that led him to break away from his party, whose authoritarianism he questions:

“In the Tunisian revolution, there was no central committee to guide the revolution with the red flag. In *Kasbah 1 and 2*, youths were organized in a horizontal way without having theorized it. [...] We were in the process of getting rid of this watchword logic, when one central brain does the thinking and young people just have to do the executing. It was the youth’s revolution”.

The criticism of parties’ functioning as hierarchical and undemocratic organizations is echoed throughout our sample. Five of the six respondents, members of a party at some point in their activist career, chose to leave it¹⁴. Describing parties as overly centralized and leaving no room for youth or debate, Ahmed cites the 2013 Bardo sit-in – when the Popular Front’s leadership joined Nidaa Tounes in the Salvation Front – as the moment when he opted for *exiting*. For her part, Hamida, a Baath Movement member, left her political organization in 2015 under similar circumstances. She insists on parties’ sclerosis, unable to rely on the youth:

“They were hostile to change, to discussion. Even at the level of forms of engagement. We are young, new forms exists, there are the new technologies. We are no longer at Ben Ali’s time, we must evolve. We had to adapt to the new world around us, that was the point that did not work between us and the so-called seniors and leaders. It was a generation problem”¹⁵.

¹⁴ The activist who has not left his political party is Omar, from the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). Interview with Omar, Tunis, November 9, 2021.

¹⁵ Interview with Hamida (Skype), December 9, 2021.

While, from 2014 onwards, radical left parties experienced both a haemorrhage and a drying up of young adherents' recruitment, the UGET remained our respondents' (12 members out of 16) main political socialization organization, confirming the university's role as a space for militant socialization¹⁶. All of them acknowledge the fundamental role played by the student union both in their activist experience accumulation, and in activist networks' constitution. For example, the ex-militants of the UJCT (Larbi, Ahmed) rubbed shoulders with Jil Jadid (New Generation) (Salwa) activists¹⁷ and frequented the same cafes.

It is precisely from these networks that the first campaigns were developed, between 2011 and 2015 on the Internet, and that a whole series of movements arose, supposed to embody the revolutionary youth's spirit some of the older respondents participated in. Disappointed with partisan activism, Larbi recalls his participation in two internet campaigns ("Me too, I burned a police station down" and "They did not tell us")¹⁸, and his "anarchist experimentation" in the *al Mouchtarak* and *al Fellaga* newspapers, as well as his "horizontal experience" within the Doustourna (our constitution) network. According to him, this "network" constituted an important moment in the theorization of horizontality in Tunisia. It was the latest avatar of an initiative taken in 2011 by former extreme left group activists, "Perspectives", in association with young neo-left activists to publish a political platform "the March 20 manifesto", whose stated objective was the drafting of a Constitution on a participatory mode. In July 2011, this collective mobilised 350 people in the city of Mahdia to draft a constitution with the help of Tunisian and foreign constitutional experts. About thirty participants in the movement seceded, on the grounds that some of the members were running for election to the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) under the Doustourna label (Ben Mami and Gobe 2021). In 2012, they created the association Tharek (move) which aimed to promote horizontality in Tunisia. Two years later, they organized the Horizontal Assembly, a think tank meant to promote forms of horizontal democracy in Tunisia (Belhadj 2021,112-113) and in which four of our interviewees participated: Khadija, Soraya, Salwa and Zayneb¹⁹. The latter insists she has learned a lot from the Horizontal Assembly, a "very technical" collective in which she was able to perfect her knowledge in horizontal meetings' organization.

In addition, for some of our activists, the 2011 to 2014 transitional period of drafting the new constitution was an opportunity to develop a reflection on their activism theoretical and practical foundations and learn from the Spanish, Greek or New York *indignados'* experiences, notably thanks to exchanges during trips and stays abroad or during the two world social forums held in Tunis in 2013 and 2015²⁰. For his part, Omar reports on his travels abroad, his participation in seminars, his meetings with Occupy Wall Street activists and the *indignados*. As for Larbi, he highlights his reading of Toni Negri and especially Rhizome, the book by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatari. In fact, the

¹⁶ About the university as a political socialization arena in North Africa, see Desrues and Kirhlani (2013).

¹⁷ Created in Tunis, the April 28, 2011, this "intellectual and political movement" (how it calls itself), refusing "the confinement of Marxism-Leninism", promotes forms of direct and horizontal democracy (Sghiri 2019).

¹⁸ Both labels refer to two campaigns that took place mainly online.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.facebook.com/AssembleeHorizontaleOfficielle>.

²⁰ For an approach to the profiles of young Tunisian activists present at the Social Forum of 2013 and 2015, please refer to Desrues and Velasco (2015) and to Desrues, Velasco and Elbour (2022).

reference to the latter work and the notion of rhizome, as a structure that evolves permanently, in all horizontal directions, was mobilized by some activists to account for activist networks and campaigns functioning (Tlili, 2017).

It is in this context that another collective action developed – related to the notions of accountability and transitional justice, in which three respondents participated: the 2014 hunger strike of the parents of the “martyrs and wounded of the revolution”, under the title “Our hunger results from your injustice” (*j'ûna min dhulmikum*). It gave Khadija, Rajaa and Salwa, as well as other activists, members of the Jil Jadid collective, the opportunity to know the group Truth and Justice members, whose purpose was precisely to demand that justice be done to the injured of the revolution. However, the latter movement’s failure, the ineffectiveness of the campaigns launched on the internet, the results of the 2014 presidential and legislative elections – which led to the return to the head of the state of a number of the former regime’s figures – as well as the drop in the number of protests of a socio-economic nature in 2015 (Jöst and Vatthauer, 2020), all contributed to discouraging young progressive activists²¹.

The context in the summer of 2015 looked *a priori* unfavourable for large-scale action after the enforcement of a state of emergency and anti-terrorism law had been adopted by Parliament on July (Elwaer, 2019). And yet, young radical left-wing activists seized on the threat of the adoption of an amnesty law – called economic reconciliation in favour of businessmen and civil servants who were caught up in acts of corruption under Ben Ali’s presidency – to unleash the decade’s most emblematic protest campaign.

Three paradigmatic campaigns

In this section, we will analyse three campaigns, focusing on *Manich Msamah*, which was the most important²². It holds this position because of its organization, the scale of the protests it generated, its capacity to mobilize over the long run (more than two years) and the opportunity it offered, according to the discourses reported by the young activists interviewed, to produce a reflexive commitment capable of raising other young and not so young people’s awareness of the cause they championed (Jaballah, 2019). Thus, our youngest interviewees joined it from the 2016 and 2017 waves of protests, and some of them made it a springboard to be part of other campaigns activists’ core group²³.

Manich Msamah: the paragon of all campaigns

The *Manich Msamah* campaign was born in August 2015 from two concurrent initiatives: the first came from cyber-dissident blogger, Aziz Hammami. On August 14, during a television debate on the amnesty bill, Hammami, known for his participation

²¹ Motaa Amin El Waer (undated), *Manich Msamah, evaluations and perspective*, Internal document of the Manich Msamah campaign (in Arabic).

²² As evidence of its place in the post-revolutionary protest panorama, *Manich Msamah* has given rise to several studies that have mainly approached it through the prism of transitional justice and its anti-corruption component. See Rigg (2022), Miller (2021), Belhadj and Kurze (2021). Belhadj (2021) approaches it as part of a comparative research with other youth collective actions of a socio-economic nature.

²³ One interviewee did not get involved in the *Manich Msamah* campaign because she was too young.

in the 2011 revolution, violently attacked the presidential text and proclaimed “No way, I will not forgive! This law will not pass... We will set fire to the Assembly of People’s Representatives if necessary!”²⁴ The left blogosphere’s positive reactions prompted him to create an activists Gmail group willing to challenge President Beji Caid Essebsi’s project. The second initiative was launched by Khadija, who contacted, on Facebook, activists frequented during the movement supporting the hunger strike of the revolution’s wounded and martyrs in order to meet and reflect on what collective actions to implement. According to Salwa, activists were aware that the adoption of the presidential project meant “the end of the revolutionary process and the collapse of the last bulwark of the revolution”²⁵. So, at the August 25 meeting in a café in Tunis, the five people present decided to organize a march between the local UGTT and Hotel Africa, several hundred meters away, where a conference organized by the anti-corruption NGO I Watch around the bill was taking place.

On August 27²⁶, the demonstrators in front of the Africa Hotel welcomed with optimism the rejection of the bill by the immense majority of the speakers and a dozen of them decided to meet on August 30 to organize “the first general assembly of *Manich Msamah*”²⁷ : the *Facebook* group was created, the name of the campaign was ratified, the movement’s horizontality, as well as its structuring, were defined and a call for a march on September 1 was launched. It is from social networks that activist nuclei will launch calls for marches and demonstrations throughout the campaigns. The campaign was presented as “an independent citizen’s initiative, open to those who want to join [...] focusing on the objective of withdrawing the bill on reconciliation”, while refusing that “parties and civil society organizations display their identity” (Ghorbali and Saïdani undated). The *Facebook* group had about 120 members²⁸ and among them about fifty were, according to Hamida²⁹, really active in the field including UGET trade unionists, activists of parties and associations, as well as journalists and lawyers covering a political spectrum ranging from centre left to the radical left.

According to Salwa, the September 1 demonstration was a decisive moment for the beginning of the campaign³⁰:

“Surprise! There were at least 500 people. The Mohamed Ali square was not big enough to accommodate us. That was definitely a defining moment for me. It

²⁴ Olfa Belhassine. 2015. « Tunisie : le Président contre la justice transitionnelle (3/3), la société civile contre-attaque », *Justiceinfo.net*, 31/08/2015, <http://www.justiceinfo.net/fr/component/k2/1816-tunisie-le-président-contre-la-justice-transitionnelle-3,-la-société-civile-contre-attaque.html/> accessed February 15, 2020.

²⁵ Interview with Salwa, Tunis, November 10, 2021.

²⁶ On this first day, see the video made by journalists from the online media site Nawaat entitled *Manich Msamah: demonstration in the capital against the economic reconciliation bill*. #مانيش_مسامح : تتظاهر في #العاصمة ضد مشروع قانون المصالحة الاقتصادية, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAuLQWa47OY/> accessed November 20, 2020,

²⁷ Interview with Zayneb, Tunis, December 1, 2021.

²⁸ *Manich Msamah* was the most followed campaign, with 77,776 followers.

²⁹ Interview with Hamida, Skype, December 9, 2021.

³⁰ On this second day, see the video made by journalists from the online media site Nawaat entitled *Manich Msamah Campaign: Police respond to demonstrators with repression*, البوليس #مانيش_مسامح: يتصدى بالقوة للمتظاهرين, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0XXsDi8k3c/> accessed November 21, 2020.

did me good to see activists from before the revolution who were back and new faces that I did not know”.

As reported by Salwa, on September 12, *Manich Msamah* called for “a large-scale action” in the form of a “national march against the reconciliation law” bringing together 2 to 3,000 people on Habib Bourguiba Avenue, including representatives of the main opposition parties from the left wing) and various associations. This is how ended what the leaders of the campaign have called the first “round”. Three more “rounds” followed, as mobilizations took place each time the bill was considered in Parliament³¹. Eventually, nearly three years after the launch of the campaign, a watered-down version of the bill was adopted by MPs in September 2017, granting amnesty to civil servants and not to businessmen³².

Hasebhoum: denouncing the impunity of the security forces

The *Hasebhoum* campaign was born in December 2015, shortly after the beginning of *Manich Msamah*. Contextually, it resulted from the wrongful arrest and detention of Afra Ben Aza, a high school student, because of her participation in a demonstration against the planned destruction of the traditional Bou Makhlouf café, in the city of El Kef (northwest of the country) and the presentation to Parliament of a bill on the repression of attacks against the armed forces, accused of enshrining impunity for security forces members. The campaign objective was to prevent the adoption by Parliament of this bill, and then of its more or less watered-down versions that had since been passed one after the other.

In January 2016, four of our respondents³³ participated in the creation of the campaign’s *Facebook* page³⁴. Our youngest respondents joined the campaign between 2016 and 2020³⁵, that is, when the law returned to parliament to be debated³⁶. The return of the law before the MPs gave the opportunity to the campaign core (about twenty members) in 2017 and 2020 to organize demonstrations in front of the Chamber of Deputies. The 7 and 8 October 2020 demonstrations were described by our respondents as particularly successful, since the government withdrew the bill and

³¹ According to Rigg (2022), the campaign is said to have organized nearly 80 events, mainly in the capital: sit-ins, marches, petition-signing campaigns, graffiti and poster-posting operations, organization of open workshops in public places, etc.

³² On *Manich Msamah*'s last stand, see the Nawaat video entitled *Manich Msamah , a round lost, but the mobilization and the fight continue*, (261) *النضال و التعبئة و التواصل* - مانيش مسامح: رغم خسارة رonde، تتواصل التعبئة و النضال (261) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOW8yiYEXmw> /accessed November 20, 2020.

³³ Hamida, Ahmed, Rajaa and Moncef. The latter, a former football ultra, has a dissonant profile compared to the other respondents. Born in 1994, from a very modest family in the working-class neighborhood of Bab Jdid in Tunis, he discovered politics in the stadiums with the ultra-group of football Club Africain. Self-taught in street arts, he created a small company specialized in street murals. Interview with Moncef, La Marsa, November 24, 2021.

³⁴ See: https://www.facebook.com/Hasebhoum/?ref=page_internal. *Hasebhoum* is the most popular campaign on Facebook, after *Manich Msamah* (47,792 followers). According to the campaign activists we interviewed, the *Hasebhoum* steering committee comprised around twenty members.

³⁵ Ali, Latifa, Malika, Yasmine, Leila, and Salwa.

³⁶ “We demonstrate every time there is a discussion session about the law in Parliament, otherwise during other periods, we organize press conferences to denounce police actions, especially by the police unions, which are our arch enemies!”. Interview with Malika, Tunis, December 2, 2021.

the campaign rallied several hundred demonstrators and various LGBT, feminist and human rights associations around it³⁷.

Fech Nestanaw: a movement derived from Manich Msamah

This campaign sought to obtain the withdrawal of the 2018 budget law. Adopted by Parliament in December 2017, this text provided for a series of tax increases hitting primarily the working and middle classes, while granting various tax exemptions to businessmen.

The protest movement was launched on January 3, 2018, the anniversary of the 1984 “bread revolt”, while *Manich Msamah* was experiencing a period of wavering between the vote of the administrative reconciliation law and its own general assembly in February 2018³⁸. It could be regarded as a “spin-off movement” (MacAdam, 1995) from *Manich Msamah*, insofar as some of the activists wanted to revive the protest against the government. Yet, at the same time, it aroused other *Manich Msamah* activists’ reservations. Indeed, *Fech Nestanaw* resulted from the initiative of about twenty *Manich Msamah* activists, divided between non-members and young activists of the Workers’ Party and the Democratic Current³⁹. The role played by the Workers’ Party members judged rather negatively by Zayneb who, while having participated in the campaign “without being very active”, viewed it as a collective action that was content to recuperate “already existing militant networks”⁴⁰.

On the other hand, our youngest respondents, who arrived in *Manich Msamah* during the second and third rounds, were much more enthusiastic about *Fech Nestanaw*, as the movement allowed some of them to stand in the core of the campaign.

Among the campaigns analysed, *Hasebhoum* can boast of having succeeded in bringing down the bill. *Manich Msamah*, on the other hand, has a mixed record. Because of its exceptional longevity, its ability to incorporate activists from most parties and associations promoting democracy and human rights, *Manich Msamah* was a success; but it was a failure, too, insofar as the presidential amnesty law was, in part, adopted and, during the general assembly held on February 10, 2018⁴¹, participants were unable to agree on the follow-up to the campaign. As for the *Fech Nestanaw* campaign, it quickly disappeared in March 2018: it was violently repressed by the authorities and could not prevent the enactment of the finance law.

³⁷ Interview with Yasmine, Tunis, December 4, 2021 and Leila, Tunis, December 8, 2021. See also the video produced by Nawaat journalists entitled Bardo: the Hasebhoum campaign succeeds in postponing consideration of the law on the security forces, (3) حملة #حاسبهم تنجح في تأجيل النظر في قانون (3) باردو: حملة #حاسبهم تنجح في تأجيل النظر في قانون (3) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPzaVb7zrBY/> accessed March 20, 2020.

³⁸ The campaign’s Facebook page was created on December 31, 2017. It boasts 30,121 followers.

³⁹ Its “steering committee” comprised around 25 members. Interview with Latifa, Tunis, December 8, 2021.

⁴⁰ See the video produced by Nawaat journalists entitled Youth protest campaigns: the challenge of development and the ambiguities of relations with political parties, (3) الحملات الاحتجاجية الشبابية: رهان التطور (3) - وضبابية العلاقة مع الأحزاب <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Hu4Wtuqm3k/> accessed march 15, 2020

⁴¹ On the general assembly’s debates and issues, see the article of the activist Layla Riahi, “Manich Msamah: Retour critique sur un moment politique”, *Nawaat*, <https://nawaat.org/2018/02/09/manich-msamah-retour-critique-sur-un-moment-politique/> accessed December 28, 2019. Interview (Skype) with Soraya, January 20, 2020.

This record shows that the campaigns have not created sustainable coalitions capable of morphing into a social movement or a political party and bringing about structural transformations in terms of public policies and social relations.

Nevertheless, beyond these criticisms, which not all interviewees share, the unfolding of these campaigns has shown the capacity of their central core to innovate by resorting to direct micro-political actions (Hamdi, 2011) using, among other things, humour and derision to avoid fatigue and the withdrawal of the rest of the activists and the public. It also allowed them, with varying degrees of success, to preserve their operating principles around the horizontality that had become the campaigns “hallmark”.

Campaigns as a playful space for experimenting with horizontality and an innovative grammar of protest

For Tunisian activists, the campaigns had been a playground for experimenting with certain means of action already implemented in alter-globalization movements and for introducing new modes of expression. Innovation is an omnipresent word in our respondents’ discourses. In general, the campaigns have constituted frameworks for the blossoming of their members’ creativity and subjectivity. With this in mind, we can ask whether reference to protest innovations is part of a distinction logic and was linked to the social recruitment of activists, which would contribute to reinforcing the current movements’ generational trait in relation to previous ones (Mathieu, 2011). Activists are also characterized by the intellectualized relationship that some have with protest action⁴². Often attentive readers of the analyses that the social sciences propose of their struggles, they are all the more inclined to endorse the image of themselves that is being reflected back to them, since it valorises them by placing them at the forefront of social conflict.

Among the campaigns, it is the core of *Manich Msamah* activists who have gone the furthest in the politics of night graffiti in urban space, through the *Wanted* campaign⁴³. The latter’s starting point is a photo-shock, dated May 5, 2016, which shows Slim Chiboub, businessman and ex-president Ben Ali’s son-in-law, smiling and shaking hands with the vice president of the Truth and Dignity Instance, the Tunisian reconciliation commission, at the time of signing an arbitration and reconciliation agreement. This image aroused most activists’ indignation. Salwa, a self-described “western film fan”, proposed to prepare an operation to put up posters in the Tunis streets with Ben Ali regime’s corrupt figures’ effigies: “I proposed to replace the faces and slogans. We removed the ‘dead or alive’ and display instead the crime Ben Ali’s henchmen had committed⁴⁴. For four nights, seven four-member teams met at Omar’s home to prepare the operations, before sticking the posters in the various districts of Tunis. That is how, the next morning, Tunisians saw, on a sepia-coloured poster

⁴² Note that Latifa and Djamel wrote a master’s thesis on the Jemna rural protest movement while Moutaa Amin Elwaer wrote on the UGET.

⁴³ The making of innovative political iconography in Tunisia preceded the wave of campaigns in the middle of the past decade as Rajaa recalls, who highlights, in her capacity as a “political graffiti artist”, all the graphic innovations developed by activists over the years, particularly through the graffiti movement, Zwaoula (wretched). Interview with Rajaa, May 7, 2018. See also Butler (2020).

⁴⁴ Interview with Salwa, Tunis, November 10, 2021.

reproducing *wanted* criminals price-tag, that is to say, wanted against a certain sum, symbolic of the entourage of the deposed president's ill-gotten wealth⁴⁵.

Respondents insisted on the way the campaigns' *modus operandi* had dynamized the classic protest marches by visual and sound effects, as well as by the crude content of slogans, equating rulers and police services to mafia. In this regard, within *Manich Msamah*, Ali insisted on the role played by the "*lajnat blada o rakaka*" (the fooling around and pain in the ass committee), which he was a member of. It aimed to give the slogans and protest songs a satirical dimension. In the process, the campaign took on an atmosphere inspired by rap culture and the ambience created from the outset by ultras in football stadiums in its protests (Jaballah, 2018). Sporting Anonymous' masks, T-shirts, and banners marked with the campaign's logo (the gavel of justice encircled in a sign indicating a one-way street), protesters appropriated the ultras' sirens, drums and chants:

"We wanted to make it a carnival of a kind. People came there to express themselves and enjoy the atmosphere. We decided to do away with the classic slogans and introduce short songs that people could learn easily. We introduced the drum and then the megaphone, which I later used to give rhythm to the songs, as the number of demonstrators increased"⁴⁶.

Through their political iconography, *Hasebhoum* activists proposed to denounce police impunity:

"On the back of the campaign T-shirt, we had stuck the image of a crossed-out carrot, because the Ministry of Interior's spokesman always talked about *zajr al i'tida* [repression of aggression]. We played on the echo between the word *zajr* and the word *jazr*, carrot in classical Arabic"⁴⁷.

Our respondents also drew from the reservoir of some alter-globalization collectives' carnivalesque *modus operandi*. Latifa, in the context of the *Fech Nestanaw* campaign, refers to the practices of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), a British and international, alter-globalist organization that operated without a leader or centralization and conducted, in groups of 5 to 20 "clowns", operations to destabilize the police:

"On January 14 [2018], we launched the Activist Clown Brigades. There were seven of us wearing the clown outfit; that day was chaos. We portrayed a scene, in the middle of the avenue, with screams and blows to the face, in the manner of mourners at funerals. We burst into the crowd of demonstrators: neither the *nahdaouis* nor the police were able to react, they were so shocked!

⁴⁵ See the videos made by Nawaat journalists entitled: *Mohamed Ghariani wanted for accountability*, *Manich Msamah*: محمد الغرياني مطلوب للمحاسبة# <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48o0UvhlulwI>; *After Slim Chiboub, Abdelwahab Abdallah has been summoned by the courts* (261) # *Manich Msamah*: بعد سليم شيبوب، عيد - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=800n-RbiYMc> /accessed November 20, 2020.

⁴⁶ Interview with Moncef, La Marsa, November 21, 2021.

⁴⁷ Interview with Yasmine, Tunis, December 4, 2021.

They were just watching us! There, in no more than thirty minutes, we distributed 2,400 leaflets of the Fech Nestanaw's communiqué!⁴⁸

As for slogans, they played on rhymes, aiming to ridicule the opponent. They had diversified by drawing on various protest imaginaries that were sometimes recombined according to the various campaigns' objectives: for example, in the *Manich Msamah* movement, the statement "The people want the end of corruption" refers to the 2010-2011 revolutionary moment ("the people want the fall of the regime"). Some slogans belonged to the register of popular insults such as "The police is a pimp (*tahhan*)" or "Mechichi [the former head of the government September 2020-July 2021] you pimp! Here we are, and in broad daylight, too!" (*Hasebhoum* campaign).

Other statements denounced the presidential discourse and the collusion between the ruling oligarchy and a corrupt businessmen's class: "Stability is stability against the power of the mafias". As for the slogan, "The State is worm-eaten! It's not a State, it's Mahrous' farm!"⁴⁹, mobilized on the occasion of *Manich Msamah* and *Fech Nestanaw*, it is anchored in the television culture these young people guzzled during their childhood in the years 1990-2000 and refers to "the idea that the State is no longer, and that the country is like one big circus or big zoo, like Mahrous' farm"⁵⁰. This is witness to an original work on the language that allows to reframe the campaign by diverting and recombining the statement terms of the public policies that are being decried.

Through these actions, some of the interviewees felt they were playing with power on an equal footing (*nidd bi nidd*), particularly within the *Manich Msamah* campaign:

"I felt I was impacting the political scene directly. We were in constant contact with Nidaa's top leaders. The expression they used to refer to us: *froukh tnaquiz*, "immature, gesticulating kids" [*froukh* means chicks in Tunisian dialect], and who don't know what they are doing, eh! yes! These kids opposed this law for more than two years and here they are blocking it now"⁵¹.

In addition, these campaigns drew their creativity from their determination to distance themselves from institutional politics and develop horizontal decision-making modalities. Activists thus aim to escape the problem of capturing the power of collective action, implied by certain forms of delegation, which would transform "power-on" into its opposite, "power-over" (Holloway, 2002). Activists saw campaigns as spaces where they intensely engaged in their commitment. This horizontality experimentation allowed them to distance themselves from parties' and unions' and even associations' hierarchical structures, by having the feeling of practicing a form of direct democracy, prefiguring the social organization they aspired to (Belhadj, 2021: 161). However, we note a relaxation, and even the formulation of criticisms among some of our respondents with regard to horizontality.

⁴⁸ Interview with Latifa, Tunis, December 8, 2021.

⁴⁹ See the video produced by Nawaat journalists entitled, "It shall not pass" (meaning the reconciliation law), مانيش مسامح... ما يتعدأش https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RSOgY6-iYI/ / accessed November 21, 2020.

⁵⁰ Interview with Ahmed, Tunis, November 3, 2021.

⁵¹ Interview with Ali, Tunis, November 13, 2021.

From the limits of horizontality to the structural limits of campaigns

Before going further in the analysis of the way our respondents understand horizontality, it is appropriate to proceed with a quick description of the campaigns' organization modalities and of the limits that they pose to the longevity of the protest action. In general, they are structured around two poles: the first one is arranged around, more or less regular, activists' meetings constituting the core of the campaign. Zayneb who was one of the activists in charge of ensuring the application of the rules of horizontality within *Manich Msamah* and of organizing training sessions for new members, explains: "it is your degree of involvement in the face-to-face meetings and in the organization of actions that makes you a full campaign member". It is in these meetings that decisions are made and strategy is developed; the second, the *Facebook* group, is a space for monitoring government activity and, in *Manich Msamah's* case, a way for those who did not attend the physical meetings to participate in the development of the campaign's strategy (Belhadj 2021: 63). To these hubs, depending on the size of the campaign, should be added the establishment of permanent and *ad hoc* committees, pools of spokespersons, coordinators, etc. These various bodies had to function according to the horizontality rules. In other words, it is a matter of circulating information transparently within the group (by setting up a "holoptic" communication) and of ensuring that decisions are taken without a vote and with everyone's consent.

In general, the practice of horizontality is seen by our respondents as a powerful tool for identifying with the collective and exercising real equality. It gives the possibility to be recognized by others as having the capacity to formulate proposals and to participate in the decision-making process:

"When I made a proposal during a meeting, I found, one week later, that it had been adopted. I really liked that! I felt I was part of a group. I stopped all other activities and concentrated on *Manich Msamah*. I put in what I had learned from my little experience"⁵².

However, some of our respondents have a mixed assessment of the horizontal experimentation. In the application of horizontality, the evaluation document in *Manich Msamah*⁵³ points out a difficulty in the implementation of transparency within the campaign, due to the emergence of leaderships that were perpetuated because of "lack of structure" and "some members' excessive voluntariness under the pretext of efficiency". Therefore, leaders tended to accumulate information "in the process of carrying out tasks" and not to share them. This made it easier for them to be identified as a resource person both inside and outside the campaign, which reinforced their standing as leaders. Ahmed echoed this criticism, adding with a touch of humour, "It's Darwinian! [laughs]. In every group, some people stand out. They evolve faster than the others and hold the top positions". Ali, extends this reasoning about the horizontality practiced by *Manich Msamah* in the name of knowledge and competence:

⁵² Interview with Moncef, La Marsa, November 21, 2021.

⁵³ *Evaluation document on the application of horizontality in Manich Msamah*. Document kindly provided by the author.

“The problem started when the campaign gained momentum. Some people have stepped out of their roles to claim other functions! In the name of horizontality, a young person from the field could claim the right to write a press release and to take part in the elaboration of the campaign strategy. I am not disparaging anyone, but I sometimes wonder: are they really qualified for that?”

As for Salwa, she balances meetings’ inclusive nature and the effectiveness of field action:

“It would have been necessary for an authority to take a decision when it was urgent. We paid the price with the Interim Constitutional Review Board episode. We had its initial report leaked that the reconciliation bill was unconstitutional, so we had the opportunity to release it before its decision was published. The debate took too long between those who were for and those against it. Then the official decision came out. It was in favour of the bill... We had wasted a golden opportunity!”

To overcome this difficulty, especially within *Hasebhoum*, the militant core sometimes resorted to voting⁵⁴. Thus, the vote, which was evacuated through the door, returned by the window in the name of action efficiency. Through the issue of effectiveness arises that of the impact of the militant commitment on Tunisian society.

The paradox is that experienced activists, who have themselves introduced horizontality into campaigns, find themselves, because of their experience, skills and charisma, in a position to become informal, non-mandated leaders. In doing so, they are conveying the perception that horizontality is limited by its own principles⁵⁵.

Likewise, within the framework of *Manich Msamah*, some activists attempted to move beyond the campaign’s *ad hoc* and specific nature by transforming it into a more perennial structure, the nucleus of what could have constituted an alliance between campaign activists and other social protest movement members, both in the country’s hinterland and in the popular suburbs. Omar considers, in this regard, that an opportunity was lost on account of some *Manich Msamah*’s currents and members:

“The campaigns... so what? What is the use of all this if stakeholders do not think of moving to a new perspective? [...] There was an opportunity for the campaign to become something else, the day the law was forced through Parliament. I told Ahmed and Malek at that time. I proposed them a scenario. The campaign had to become a political youth movement. We would have gone beyond the mere protest”.

A similar observation can be made by Ali:

“Personally, I came to the conclusion that if these movements do not have popular support, if they do not interact with the regions, in permanent coordination, and not in an episodic way [...], then they just cannot exist”.

⁵⁴ Interview with Leila, December 8, 2021.

⁵⁵ For an overview of the horizontalism in another north African context, see Chalcraft (2012).

He also tried to introduce positivity into collective action by contributing to the creation of the group *Manich Msalmin* (We won't give up), which included Omar and Zayneb. This collective was the result of the meeting of several movements and associations belonging to “various professions, groups from youth campaigns, *Fech Nestanaw*, *Manich Msamah*, and groups and associations acting at local level”. Ali defines this collective as a social movement project whose vocation would not be only to confront the governmental opponent, as in the campaigns, but to build a project for economic and social emancipation.

Conclusion

We have presented the distinctive nature of campaigns as a repertoire of protest action and how the Tunisian revolutionary upsurge shaped a new socio-political generation of young activists who latched on to this repertoire. These protestors share the feeling of belonging to a generation sacrificed by the political elite, who confiscated their revolution. Then, their involvement in campaigns provided them the chance of replaying, on a small scale, the homothetic scenario of a political change not depending entirely on a leader or a vertical hierarchical structure.

We have shown the actions, praxis and discourses of these mainly urban middle-class, left-wing and university-educated young activists, can be construed as the expression of a specific identity peculiar to a particular type of activist. They advocated leaderless participation and mobilised against controversial political decisions by experimenting with horizontality and a playful political iconography against a classical repertoire of action. We have documented that the characteristics of the campaign as a flexible mobilisation mode are particularly well-suited to the interconnected micro-networks of these young left-wing activists, often with a background of student activism. Likewise, through our analysis of both protest campaigns dynamics and its articulation with individual dimensions of collective action, we have underscored the importance for this type of activism of social belonging; prior micro level interpersonal relationships; participatory innovation; performance; and some micro-cohorts' generational identifications.

We believe these dimensions are fundamental to understanding the cultural shift and the new identity processes that characterise the new generation and new activism practices. This cultural and identity dimensions proper to this activist generation did not prevent our respondents from being confronted with the particular limits posed by these new political action modes. In this sense, we have pointed out the limits of horizontality as reported by our interviewees and the disappointment of others who regret the campaigns failed to lead to perennial socio-political movements; or to structural transformations in terms of public policies; or to extend mobilization to other sectors of the population and, in particular, to youth from deprived urban suburbs and regions.

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