Civil society advocacy for decentralization and youth participation in local elections through Facebook: The Tunisian Case

Mohamed Eymen Gamha
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The Noble Quran (16:53)

Life is a continuous learning process and a constant self-reassessment. This research is a drop in the endless sea of knowledge, and “Little drops of water, Little grains of sand, Make the mighty ocean, and the pleasant land”.

Julia Abigail Fletcher Carney (1844)

Hope is what makes us live, Nations rise and fall in the waves of history. Tunisia, the mother, the phoenix, can arise from its own ashes, it`s a matter of patience and time.
Abstract

This masters thesis discusses Tunisian civil society's advocacy for decentralization and local elections throughout 2018 on Facebook, while considering age and gender dynamics. Existing studies provide an overview on the decentralization reform process in Tunisia and other countries in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. This research sheds new light on these issues by addressing decentralization from a Communication for Development (C4D) perspective. The subject of this masters thesis is situated in a threefold context: First, in the context of broader debates on the evolution of decentralization approaches in the decentralization field, second, in the Tunisian context of decentralization reform process, and finally, in the context of youth participation in public debate and elections in Tunisia. The case study focuses on Mourakiboun (The Observers), considered among the most active Civil society organizations advocating for decentralization and local elections. This research draws on existing research related to social media as a public sphere, social media for development, as well as the concepts of advocacy and civic engagement. This paper analyses Mourakiboun's advocacy for decentralization and local elections throughout 2018 based on quantitative content analysis of its Facebook page statistics, with a focus on five specific periods. Qualitative surveys for Facebook users as well as in-depth interviews with Mourakiboun's representatives complement the first research method by understanding opinion on this advocacy from involved stakeholders. The main findings of this paper show a gap between active interaction of Facebook users on Mourakiboun's page, especially 18-34 years old, on Facebook posts related to decentralization and local elections and their participation in May 6th, 2018 local elections. They also show a weak interest of 13-17 year olds in posts related to decentralization and local elections, and that male users are more engaged with the page than their females counterparts. Additionally, the analysis of Facebook stats highlights the active engagement of users with posts promoting Mourakiboun's smartphone Apps. Finally, the research findings are also detailed for each of the five periods.

Key Words: Decentralization, local elections, advocacy, civil society, civic engagement, youth, Tunisia.
1. Introduction

Low youth participation in elections, and broadly in public debate, is a global trend. In its report about “Youth Participation in Electoral Processes” (2017:11), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) explains that participation and influence on formal politics of 15-24 years old young people remain limited, despite they constitute about one fifth of the world’s population. For instance, 60% of eligible voters in the European Union between 16 or 18 and 24 years old opted not to vote in their country's most recent national elections (ibid). In the same sense, Forbrig (2005:5) addresses the issue of the dramatic decline in the political involvement of younger generations in the European Union, and decreasing levels of youth participation in elections, political parties and traditional social organizations. By the same logic, radio NPR (2016) shows that millennials, people aged between 18-35 as defined by the Pew Research center, continue to have the lowest voter turnout of any age group in the United States. The same trend goes for the Middle East and North African region (MENA), as it has the world’s second-youngest population after Sub-Saharan Africa (Saadi, 2018).

Following 2011 uprising in Tunisia which ignited the Arab Spring, decentralization reform was undertaken in the country to empower local governments and foster civic engagement on a local scale, with the aim to reposition youth at the center of public debate. The Law on local and regional elections, paved the way for the first free and fair local elections since 2011. It allowed different political forces, civil society as well as citizens to agree on issues such age and gender based positive discrimination, as well as in favor of persons with reduced mobility in electoral lists (Mekki, 2017). Nonetheless, low youth participation in public debate remains a challenge for the democratic transition process. Despite being the main actor in 2011 uprising which led to the regime toppling, Tunisian youth have increasingly abstained from voting and participating in politics. For example, it is estimated that 80 percent of eligible Tunisian voters aged between 18 and 25 boycotted the vote in 2014, the country’s second free and fair parliamentary election in its history (Yerkes, 2016). It is equally important to take into consideration that 18-35 year old youth represent more than one-third of the Tunisian population according to 2014 national census (INS, 2014). When it comes to participation in May 6th, 2018 local elections, total voters’ participation was down at 33.7%. Most voters were older, and some politicians wondered whether it was due to a lack of enthusiasm among Tunisia’s young about the political class (Amara, 2018).

However, participation in public debate in a lengthy process, and shall not be limited to voting. Civil society organizations(CSOs) was working on raising awareness of citizens on issues affecting them in the course of the Tunisian democratic transition. These issues include for instance transitional justice, the fight against corruption or decentralization. In the frame of communication for development, this master’s thesis starts from questioning how, throughout 2018,civil society used Facebook to advocate for decentralization and participation in May 6th, 2018 local elections, the first free and fair elections of its kind.

Several CSOs have been working on this topic, with some focusing on the live broadcasting of parliamentary debates related to the draft of laws related to decentralization and the appointment of newly elected councils in the main municipalities. Among them, Mourakiboun’s (the observers) main activity consists of electoral observation. This does not preclude it to be among the most active CSOs to advocate on decentralization during the various stages of this reform process, whether in parallel with parliamentary debates related to the draft the electoral law of May, 6th elections, during the electoral campaign between April 14th and May 4th, 2018, or in parallel withthe appointment of municipal councilors. Mourakiboun strongly relied on Facebook to discuss this reform and published audiovisual and written content on its page, aiming to reposition citizens at the core of political action by offering them the means to stay updated on public debate. The present research focuses on Facebook due to its prominence in the country, with 66% of the population online on this platform and 18-34 years old youth representing 65% of Facebook users.
according to the social media statistics\textsuperscript{1}.

Considering these points, the present master’s thesis aims to answer the following question:

**When looking at age groups and gender dynamics, what are the categories *Mourakiboun* attracted the most with their content related to decentralization and local elections on Facebook throughout 2018?**

To further discern the role of *Mourakiboun*’s advocacy for decentralization and voting in May 6th local elections to draw Tunisian youth’s attention on these matters, the following questions shall be asked:

1. During which periods users interacted the most with *Mourakiboun*’s content related to decentralization and local elections?

2. How did female users interact with *Mourakiboun*’s content about decentralization and local elections compared to their male counterparts?

3. In view of the uninvolvement of young citizens in public debate and their decreasing participation in elections since 2011, how did young [18-34] users interacted with *Mourakiboun*’s content about decentralization and local elections compared to other age groups?

4. To which extent the organization’s advocacy for decentralization and participation in 2018 local elections on Facebook has raised the interest of youth in these two topics?  
   1: According to *Mourakiboun* / 2: According to youth.

Before answering these questions, the background section gives an overview of the evolution of decentralization approach in the development field and youth participation in public debate, with a focus on the Tunisian case. This section also includes an overview of *Mourakiboun*’s activities and objectives. The literature review section focuses on existing researches discussing social media as a public sphere, social media for development, and drawing on the concepts of advocacy and civic engagement. It is followed by the presentation of quantitative and qualitative research methods to tackle this subject as well as the results of the analysis.

Quantitative content analysis is based on Facebook insights related to the evolution of page likes, posts reach and the interaction of users with it. These three indicators are divided by age and gender. Qualitative research methods consist on a qualitative survey for Facebook users and a series of in-depth interviews with *Mourakiboun*’s representatives to understand their respective point of view on advocacy for decentralization and local elections. Finally, the research conclusions and recommendations are presented, with the objective of opening the discussion about the subject of this research.

It should be noted that the research subject is recent considering that the Tunisia’s first transparent local elections were held on May 6th, 2018, one year ago, besides the fact that the decentralization reform process is still ongoing. There are several studies about decentralization in Tunisia, or more largely, in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. However, they did not tackle this topic from a communication for development angle. This research’s focus on Civil society’s advocacy for decentralization may provide a basis to further understand communication for Decentralization from different perspectives, both in Tunisia and MENA region.

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\textsuperscript{1} Retrieved from: \url{http://blog.medianet.tn/blog/etude-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux-en-afrique-la-tunisie-simpose} [in French].
2. Background

The background chapter firstly gives an overview of how decentralization was approached within development discourse. International organizations started with collaborating with state actors to implement decentralization reforms, then gradually integrated civil society actors in their programs. It is followed by the Tunisian experience with the decentralization reform in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, from its enshrinement in the 2014 Constitution to the first free and fair elections in May, 6th 2018. The third section presents Mourakiboun's activities in general and its approach to advocacy for decentralization reform and May 6th, 2018 local elections, a milestone in this reform process. Finally, the fourth section discusses youth participation in public debate and elections in Tunisia, considering that it is one of the most consistent predictors of political participation (Levy et al.; 2016).

2.1 The evolution of decentralization approach in the development field

Rondinelli (1999:2) defines decentralization as the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organizations or the private sector. It can be political, administrative, fiscal or a mixture of these. While political decentralization gives citizens and their elected representatives more power in public decision making, administrative decentralization aims to transfer responsibility for planning, financing, and managing certain public functions from the central government to local authorities. Fiscal decentralization ensures a partial financial autonomy besides of financial transfers from central authorities.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, decentralization was seen as an adequate response to globalization, which forced some governments to recognize the limitations and constraints of central economic planning and management (Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007:3). Consequently, researchers started in the 1980s to consider decentralization as a solution to the problems of developing countries and a response to boost their economies and bureaucracies (Schneider, 2003:33-34). Therefore, multilateral institutions began to include this component in many of their programs, and the decentralization of services and privatization were introduced into the developing world as conditions for bilateral assistance and multilateral financial support (Ramirez and Quarry, 2004:1). This encouraged national governments for decentralization in order to accelerate development, break bureaucratic bottlenecks arising from centralized government planning and management (Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007:3). In this context, International organizations, including the World Bank and the International German Cooperation Agency (GIZ), developed programs to promote decentralization in various regions in the world, whether in Latin America, South and South-East Asia as well as Sub-Saharan and North Africa.

The second wave of decentralization in the 1990s encouraged public participation through private sector and CSOs, which includes all non-market and non-state organizations outside of the family in which people organize themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain (OECD, 2009:26). This new dynamics aims to help governments in balancing regional development, empowering communities, and mobilizing private resources for investment in infrastructure and facilities (ibid, p7). Civil society's participation is perceived to be indispensable in assuring need-based planning and implementation of activities at local level, and in strengthening accountability of local governments to their citizens (Egli and Zürcher, 2007:2). Individuals involved in CSOs are driven by volunteerism, with the responsibility to develop their own system of a safety net. They also are those who understand the most the specificities of their direct environment, allowing them to be more responsive to needs in their respective areas than central authorities. CSOs, according to Lane (2003:363), fill the breach left in the wake of a retreating, dysfunctional state, and, on another
hand, contribute in overcoming declining public confidence in the fidelity and efficiency of the state (Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Their increasing participation and growth has led to much reliance on their role in improvement of the quality of life at the local level, given their crucial role in providing oversight and accountability.

Consequently, development assistance has enabled a broadening of the agenda of these organizations to include human rights issues, community development, integration of women in development, advocacy and electoral matters which are representative of a wider spectrum of the technical and representational dimensions of governance (Grant, 2000:18). It should also be noted that not all civil society actors are committed to the pursuit of public good, as some working towards non-democratic ends, with anti-democratic groups of all political hues have used the ballot box to achieve power worldwide (Lipset:1963). Additionally, although CSOs follow philanthropic goals, they may be more accountable to those who pay for them and work in them than to the general public (Calhoun; 2011:13).

In Tunisia, the new political context following the Arab spring in 2011 was favorable to implement decentralization, with a view to break with central-state management that deepens socio-economic gaps between coastal and interior areas of the country. Decentralization can improve service delivery at the local level, thus finding an appropriate balance between governance at a national and at a local level. This gives the possibility to bring concrete solutions to the economic challenges, while taking into consideration the specificities of each region in the frame of national unity. International organizations developed programs to support this reform through collaboration with national partners and have advocated for decentralization reform using several tools. For instance, the World Bank uses blogs to promote its programs and activities, draws on comparative experiences in other countries, and discusses the potential impact of decentralization in the country.

In Tunisia, CSOs strongly rely on social media to address their concerns, advocate for rights, foster mobilization and create social change. Social media gives on one hand the opportunity to communicators, including CSOs, to vehicle their messages to a large audience, mainly composed of youth. Besides of that, it allows younger generations to have access to political information and knowledge to take decisions consequently. Youth participation in public debate remains a challenge in today societies. They are at the same time a great political potential, but their political behavior is less predictable than other age groups (Ilišin: 2003, in Pap et al.; 2018:3).

In general, CSOs can play two roles on a local scale, either collaborating with public authorities in the implementation of projects or playing a watchdog role. In both cases, they contribute to fostering social capital which Putnam (1995:66) defines as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.” However, although decentralization empowers local actors and fosters democracy, a strong central government is needed at the same time to manage political relationships and maintain democratic governance (Lane, 2003:363).

### 2.2 Decentralization reform in Tunisia

The major protests in Tunisia on December 2010 - January 2011, that ignited Arab spring in the MENA region, were a response to unbalanced economic growth. Indeed, wealth and investment were concentrated in coastal regions at the expense of interior ones (Hermassi, 2013:81). In addition, the ruling regime had become increasingly centralized and personalized, with representatives of central authorities appointed to implement the government’s instruction at the local level. In parallel, citizens feeling excluded and disenfranchised as municipalities had little room to operate and communicate with them (Hoel:2015). The 1959 constitution, in effect before
2011, contains a single article related to municipal councils (Turki and Verdeil, 2013:14). The article 71 of the former constitution limits the role of municipalities as it stipulates that "Municipal councils, regional councils and the structures to which the law gives the quality of local authority, manage local affairs according to the terms set by law."

Since local governments were disempowered, regions outside the coastal cities, the center of political and economic power, suffered from unequal regional development and lack of equitable distribution of wealth. For example, in 2010, the last budget passed prior to the uprising allocated 82 percent of funds to the coastal region around the capital and only 18 percent to the interior, despite the fact that the three largest coastal towns only comprise around 20 percent of the total population (Feuer: 2018).

Persons living in interior regions were economically marginalized, they had less job opportunities than those living in coastal ones. In this context, youth, who represent the biggest segment of the population, were directly affected by policies of the central government. According to the World Bank (2014:25), the severity and regional incidence of young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) reflect the extent of despair among youth, which is particularly acute in the interior and south, the cradle of the 2011 revolution. According to the same source, NEET affects more than one-quarter in the coastal region, more than one-third in the south, and about one-third of youth in the interior region. As a consequence, they played a significant role in the protests that started from SidiBouzid, Central Tunisia, and spread nationwide to ignite a wave of protests in the MENA region, known as the Arab Spring.

Following the toppling of the regime, the Tunisian democratic transition resulted in the drafting of a new constitution in 2014 that promoted the decentralization of decision making, with local government playing the biggest role in local development (Abderrahim:2017). According to chapter 7 of the 2014 constitution, comprised of 11 articles, “Local authorities shall enjoy legal personality as well as financial and administrative” and “shall adopt the mechanisms of participatory democracy and the principles of open governance”. Since decentralization is the emerging national priority, international organizations and CSOs, supporting the democratic transition, have extensively advocated for this topic to raise awareness of the population of its importance and the positive impact it might bring to the population.

In the context of political and economic challenges the country is witnessing, the population, especially youth, are less and less interested in local and national politics. May 6th, 2018 local elections represent an important milestone in Tunisia’s democratic transition process. However, youth low participation in the first transparent local elections since 2011 shows a lack of interest in this subject, and broadly in the decentralization reform. Many of them have lost hope as their employment and social concerns went unaddressed in an environment of economic crisis (Ben Abdallah:2018).

Also, temporary councils, known as “special delegations,” were appointed by the government after 2011 with specific powers to act as local assemblies, pending the organization of new municipal elections (Bras and Signoles; 2017:26). While legal, these special delegations lack legitimacy due to political shifts, with seven governments serving between 2011 and 2018. The composition of many delegations was changed several times in response to members’ discharge by central authorities and they increasingly became subject to partisan tensions. This impacted public services and drove them away from the expectations of citizens.

Besides of that, municipal districts covered only 50 percent of the territory before 2011. Since 2015

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2 Special delegations are temporary councils appointed by the government to manage local affairs until the holding of local elections.
the government created 86 new municipalities and extended the territory of 189 others to overcome this issue. Out of 350 municipalities in 2018, many of the new ones are located in rural areas, they remain “ink on paper” and face many challenges for their concrete establishment (Yerkes and Muasher: 2018).

In this context, May 6th, 2018 local elections\(^3\), the first ones since the 2011 uprising, represent an important step in this process as they allow the achievement of decentralization on the ground. However, these elections were initially scheduled for 2015, and were delayed several times due to logistical, administrative and political deadlocks. In parallel, the code of local authorities, which must precisely define the role and autonomy of local authorities in accordance to the constitution, was voted in on April 26th, few days before the polling day (Ben Abdallah:2018). This law text is important as it may have important impact on the development model in Tunisia, but the population did not have enough time to understand the role and responsibilities of candidates they would vote for. This resulted in a loss of trust in the positive impact the decentralization process, and the importance of May 2018 local elections.

CSOs are continuously advocating for the establishment of the decentralization reform and local elections since the adoption of the new constitution in 2014. Throughout the different stages, they played a watchdog role through commenting parliamentary and governmental actions on one hand. On the other hand, they sensitized population, especially youth, on the importance of this reform.

### 2.3 Mourakiboun’s advocacy for decentralization and local elections

Like most of existing associations in Tunisia, *Mourakiboun* was created following the 2011 major uprising. With a national network of more than 4,000 members, the CSO’s core activity between 2011 and 2014 was electoral observation, aiming to guarantee the holding of democratic, inclusive and transparent elections in accordance with international standards, notably during the 2011 constituent assembly elections or 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections. Since 2015, *Mourakiboun* enlarged its scope of work to include researches and policy papers to improve accountability of public and private health services.

Additionally, it started a program on decentralization reform following its adoption in the 2014 constitution. In 2015, it organized several meetings gathering representatives of “special delegations”, as well as local CSOs and parliamentarians representing each region. The objective of such meeting was to unify the perception on the new decentralization concept and exchange about the possibilities to implement it on the ground. Also, *Mourakiboun* organized several training sessions on local fiscality and territorial planning for elected members of newly created municipalities, as well a study trip to Stuttgart, Germany, for representatives of municipal councils and CSOs to exchange experience on waste management and participatory democracy mechanisms.

*Mourakiboun*’s advocacy for decentralization and local elections implies several tools, including awareness-raising spots broadcasted on public audiovisual media and community radios during voter registration and electoral campaign periods. Besides of that, in 2017, the association organized with community radios a program named “Baladiyati” (my municipality) which explains and simplifies concepts related to decentralization, such as the division of roles between central and local authorities. Furthermore, *Mourakiboun* relied on New media and Information and Communication Technologies (NMICT) to advocate for that topic, including three Smartphone apps

\[^3\]The first local elections since 2011 were organized in two steps. It is the first time that bearing arms forces (including soldiers, police, national guards and customs officers, presidential guards and civil defense forces) had the possibility to vote. They had to vote separately on April 29th, while the general public voted on May 6th. For security concerns, ballots of bearing arms forces were mixed and counted with those of general public.
and a website. The first app is aiming voters, giving them the opportunity to know more about the program of candidate lists in their respective district, with the results of the elections being published on the app following their announcement. The second app aims to increase the understanding of the Code for local authorities, the municipal councils’ responsibilities and the relation of citizens with local authorities. The third one is a database of CSOs classified by area of work and geographic location. It targets members of local authorities, allowing them to search for CSOs and contact them to include them in the planning of municipal budget or cooperate with them to implement projects on the ground. On another hand, Mourakiboun's website is a platform created to collect, visualize, and analyze election-related data such as voter turnout and result overview per electoral district.

Furthermore, Mourakiboun relied on Facebook to sensitize youth on the importance of participating in the upcoming elections as they had done before May 2018 local elections. Indeed, Facebook has become the main online platform for public and political debate since 2011 major protests. While in early 2008, there were 16,000 registered Facebook accounts, this number reached 1,800,000 in January 2011, only after 3 years (Lecomte, 2011:6). Facebook stats in 2018 show that there are 7,600,000 accounts for a population of more than 11,500,000 persons, making this social media a powerful source of information and an alternative to audiovisual and written media. In parallel with posts related to electoral incident reporting, Mourakiboun launched on its Facebook page two awareness-raising campaigns during the electoral campaign period, the first one named "If you were the President of the Municipal Council." Mourakiboun asked people about their expectations and perception of municipal councils as it considers this vox-pop as an opportunity to deliver citizens’ voices to candidates. The second consists of a series of short awareness-raising videos names "One minute of elections with Mourakiboun" for a better understanding of concepts related to decentralization and local elections.

Mourakiboun also published in 2018 a study to facilitate land use planning for newly created municipalities, along with studies in 2017 and 2018 on the perception of youth of political representation and local elections and the participation of women and youth in local elections. Noting that women living in rural areas and youth are those who voted the least in 2018 local elections, they started an advocacy campaign on December 2018 to encourage these two groups to register in order to vote in the upcoming 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. As these two audiences are different, and consequently imply different forms of advocacy, the CSO opted for flyers with cartoons explaining how women living in rural areas should register and vote in the elections, with a message targeting this group, while focused on Facebook to deliver its message to youth.

### 2.4 Youth participation in public debate and elections in Tunisia

Although the Tunisian Electoral Body (ISIE) haven’t released data related to the distribution of voters by age for the previous elections since 2011, trends show a steady decline in youth participation in elections, and more generally in public debate. For instance, Afrobarometer estimations show that 55% of 18-29 year old youth participated in 2011 parliamentary elections. However, their participation have decreased to 44% in 2014, compared to an overall voter turnout of 66% for the 2014 parliamentary elections and 59% for the second round of the presidential elections. When it comes to local elections, which outcomes may have a direct impact on the population, Mourakiboun’s survey (2018:4) on the participation of 18-35 year old youth and women

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5 Realized in cooperation with Heinrich BöllStiftung and the research company One-to-One
6 [AfroBarometer Wave V data - https://afrobarometer.org/](https://afrobarometer.org/)
7 In 2014, parliamentary as well as two-rounds presidential elections were held. Afrobarometer data do not differentiate between the parliamentary and presidential elections.
show that 71.2% of youth consider that the economic situation is very bad. This reinforces public mistrust of political class, including elected local officials (International Crisis Group: 2019). The same survey (p5) shows that 71.9% of youth are strongly dissatisfied with the political situation in the country, thus only 38.1% of them being interested in political and public affairs in their respective municipal areas. Mourakiboun’s survey on political representation and local elections (2017:19) indicate that 57.4% of surveyed persons believe that elected municipal councils can improve the situation on a local scale, but 25.5% of respondents state that they lack of trust in the political class and 16.3% lack of information about the local elections and decentralization in general.

As a result, weak youth participation was also observed in 2018 local elections, despite of their importance in the decentralization reform process and the fact that they were the first truly competitive, nationwide local elections in the country's history. The European Union Election Observation Mission (2018:19) estimates that only 23% of the 18-21 olds - who vote for their first time - have registered to May 2018 local elections and the total voting rate was less than 34%. Tunisian youth tend to participate in political parties and election process in a lesser extent than other age groups as they feel that the 2011 uprisings were "stolen" by older generations, who are excluding young people from politics (Higginson & Weinberg, 2017:2).

As a consequence, Yerkes (2017:22) explains that youth are getting distant from formal politics which includes participating in political parties, rather focusing on informal politics via social movements and protests, informal civic networks and CSOs, and informal networks. Following 2011 major protests, the new associations' law® opened the door for participation in public debate and freedom of association. The rules for starting an association were eased, thus the number of CSOs boomed. In the first years following the revolution, about 2,500 associations per year were created, compared to 191 per year from 2000 to 2010 (Yerkes, 2017:15), with currently 10,000 to 15,000 registered associations. This new opportunity gave youth a possibility to contribute in public debate and the reinforcement of civil society network contributes in consolidating the democratic transition, even though only a small fraction of young Tunisians are active in CSOs. Nonetheless, although 9 young persons out of 10 believe that participation in CSOs is important, only 6% of them are really taking part in it (ONJ;2013:12).

CSOs play a crucial role in advocating for the interests of the public and increasing civic engagement, playing a watchdog role and acting as a school for democracy (Ibid, p40). However, the above-noted imbalance of youth participation in formal and informal politics prevents the key bridging mechanism required for civil society to effectively channel the interests of the public to the government. By remaining out of the formal political sphere, youth participation in public debate may not fulfill their expectations despite their advocacy for causes they defend.

In a broader sense, youth tend to remain distant from public debate, whether through CSOs, and more generally, in formal politics. However, youth participation in local elections as candidates was contradictory of this trend. The National Election Body announced that 52% of candidates to May 6th, 2018 local elections were less than 35 years old (Blackmann et al., 2018:1). This is explained by the fact that the electoral law stipulated participation of youth and women in electoral lists, and list-makers had to satisfy both the youth and gender quotas simultaneously (Ibid, p3). As a consequence, 37% of elected municipal councilors are less than 35 years old.

Youth remain distant from taking part in public debates and elections as the socio-economic expectations that emerged during the 2011 major protests, part of the Arab Spring, are still not met. Also, youth's trust in governmental and political activity is low, which inhibit them to take part into formal politics. They are aware that participating in public debate through civil society can

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8 Decree-Law No. 88 of September 24, 2011.
bring a positive impact, but this might not be enough to transform public debate into actions on the ground. This can change, thanks to the significant percentage of young elected municipal councilors in 2018, thus contributing in reducing the gap between formal and informal politics.

### 3. Literature Review

This section provides an overview of existing literature about social media as a public sphere and social media for development, besides of advocacy, communication and civic engagement.

#### 3.1 Social media as a public sphere

Habermas’ work on public sphere (1991) explored the origin of this concept in the eighteenth century, which was the privilege of intellectual circles sharing their taste for arts and their ideological views in salons, coffee houses, and secret societies. In this nascent public sphere, communication was guided by a norm of rational argumentation and critical discussion in which the strength of argument was more important than the identity of the speaker (Ibid, p54). Simultaneously, the evolution of the press, motivated by the need of bourgeois elites to gain political power and liberalize market, gave the opportunity for intellectual leaders to be heard by a broader range of the population, thus contributing in democratizing the public sphere.

The introduction of internet and social media sped up this democratization process as they, like mass media, allowed the individuals to discuss and express their thoughts on public issues (Shirky: 2011, in Çela; 2015:195). Yet, theorists disagree when it comes to the applicability of public sphere theory to the potential for deliberative democracy, particularly on social media (Drake; 2018:18). For instance, Kellner (2014:20) suggests that, although Habermas’ analysis strongly contributes in understanding the public sphere and its relationship to democracy, the restructuring of capitalism and the technological revolution requires an expansion of his work. Nonetheless, Habermas’ public sphere (1991:245) and social media have common points as both include formal and informal political communication. While formal communication is institutionalized and generated by government or corporate bureaucracies, informal one consists of the verbalization of things culturally taken-for-granted, the rarely discussed basic experiences of one’s own biography, and ‘small talk’ under the influence of the mass media (Drake; 2018:6).

Another difference between the 18th century public sphere and social media consists on giving the possibility to amateurs to contribute to their themes of interest, confront different opinions, and find an audience. The published content in social media is reachable from anyone throughout the world, eliminating the physical and infrastructure obstacles and fostering the spread of opinions. However, discourses are affected by a lack of rational thinking and effective deliberation (Flichy: 2010). This evolution repositions citizens as an active voice in the public sphere and increases their awareness of their political power. It participates in building agendas through post-Habermasian deliberations that could have an impact on public and private agendas (Rodriguez & Miralles; 2014:404). Social media contribute in facilitating activism as it enables every single user to reflect their own identity in social movements. For example, the deliberate use of social media throughout Arab Spring social movements ensured that people had “a sense of ownership” over “the tools for crafting the revolution’s narrative” (Brisson: 2011, in Chouliaraki; 2011:276). The connectivity of ordinary voice, powerless and marginal insert them within a “global network structure and enter the battle over the minds by intervening in the global communication process” (Castells; 2007:249). Social media users in different parts of the world showed support for these movements, thus trans-mediating their voices and protesting in the name of solidarity both on a virtual and physical ground (Chouliaraki; 2011:277).
This action of public sphere, through civil society, can start on a virtual space and have an impact in the physical one, leading to regime changes. Habermas (1992, in Paffenholz&Spruk; 2006:4) defines civil society based on its role within the public sphere. He explains that organized marginal groups are needed to the political system as political parties and parliaments need to “…get informed public opinion beyond the established power structures.” This civil society contributes in the articulation of its interests in the public space to put different concerns on the political agenda. Another role of civil society consists on bringing information to citizens, by advocating and raising awareness on issues they defend, to help them get knowledge and engage in informed discussions. In this sense, social media favors the strengthening of the "public sphere" in both its cyber and global dimensions (Leocadia; 2013:6). It reinforces the role of civil society as a bridge between government and citizens, by facilitating informed discussions between them and encouraging them in participating in elections. However, this effort have to be concreted on the ground, and this depends on the level of trust between those two stakeholders.

3.2 Social media for development

Mediatization and the recurring social mobilization by means of new media are at the core of issues challenging the field of ComDev (Hemer and Tufte: 2012) since nowadays, we heavily rely on the internet both as a tool for communication and as a source of information. Social media websites, including Facebook, give users the possibility to participate in public debates and discuss ideas by publishing their stories, collaborating with others, or simply commenting and giving their feedback about existing content.

Social media can be a tool to exacerbate conflict, or help authoritarian regimes monitor and police their citizens. It can also be a tool to spur a backlash among regimes, as it was the case in the Arab Spring when social media played a profound role in breaking down authoritarian regimes. However, several authors criticize the role of social media in this case. The cyber-skeptics downplay the significance of the new technology, arguing that using the Internet gives people a false sense of participation and keeps them from actual physical protesting (Wolfsfeld et al.; 2013:117).

In his article in the New Yorker, Gladwell (2010) for instance caustically notes that “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice, rather by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.” He explains that social media distracts people from “real” activism by deluding them into thinking that they are effecting change when, in reality, they are not. Joseph (2012:152) also share this opinion on social media, discussing that it may create quicker and louder conversations, but which quickly vanishes in the large mass of information.

On the other hand, Shirky (2011), defends the role of social media to foster social movements, and bases his argumentation on Katz and Lazarsfeld's work (1955). They explain that the formation of well-considered political opinions is a two-step process; the first one being access to information and the second one being the use of that information in conversation and debate. Shirky (ibid) discusses that social media is not anymore confined to traditional media journalists, allowing a faster and farther spread of information for a better public debate. Nonetheless, online and offline actions are equally important since democratization depends on linking online debate to offline social action (Maphosa et al.; 2014:275). Besides of that, social media may also play a transformative role in human development, including advocacy for the right to exercise their civil and political rights (Nicholson et al; 2016:358). They have the potential to reach new audiences, increasing the visibility of current societal issues and engaging large numbers of individuals in those issues (Hwang and Kim: 2015, in Uhsemann; 2016:28). In a next step, the interactive social media landscape turns social media platforms into tools for mobilizing users to take part in collective action (ibid).
However, although CSOs are using social media to enhance their communication, organization, and fundraising strategies, Greenberg and MacAulay (2009:74) indicate that advocacy organizations failed to fully utilize the affordances of social media. They explain that developing a dynamic online presence is time and resource consuming and does not immediately produce tangible results. Also, not every organization desires a relationship with their constituencies that is based on two-way, symmetrical communication (ibid). They may want to communicate about their project or advocate about causes they defend but exclude the feedback of their community into their decision-making processes.

Facebook may also encourage polarization and make Internet users more narrow-minded, promoting homogeneous communities and network (Del Vicario et al., 2016), as users like pages and groups, or follow persons according to their preferences. Therefore, they remain connected to persons with similar views and do not go out of their comfort zone to engage with diverse opinions and mind-sets. This “information cocoon” (Sunstein; 2008:3) makes it unlikely that social media would cause a significant change in the knowledge and attitudes of their readers. Keen (2007:53) also criticizes the “democratization of media” as they may make radical, sweeping statements without evidence or substantiation, and the work of intellectuals may be diluted within the mass. In this sense, Habermas (2006) warns that “the price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the internet is the decentralized access to unedited stories. In this medium, contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus.”

In all cases, like print media, the internet spreads and produces information as well, enabling people to voice their opinions and discuss diverse conflicting views on a private as well as on a public level (Shirky:2011, in Uhsemann;2016:32). Developing a web presence is essential for international and civil society organizations to promote their activities and causes they defend, and they should pay attention to not to get limited to users with similar view and who are already aware of the defended causes, in addition to considering that their messages can get embedded in the large mass of information available online.

### 3.3 Advocacy, communication and civic engagement

Wilkins et al. (2014) explain that communication can be used to discover, understand, and encourage recognition of problems, as well as of potential solutions, for those engaged in the collective effort as well as for those targeted, such as public constituencies or policymakers. When it comes to development, communication is “not just facilitating development but also looking at the present state of unequal development among global communities, document its negative consequences on people and communities, and identify reasons for such an unequal spread of development benefits” (Mekote:2012, in Wilkins et al.: 2014).

Advocacy equally contributes in raising awareness of individuals about existing areas for improvement and gives potential solutions and recommendations to address them. Servaes and Malikhao (2012, in Wilkins et al.: 2014) describe advocacy as a key term in development discourse, aiming to foster public policies that are supportive to the solution of an issue or program. In the same logic, people-centered advocacy has been defined as “a set of organized actions aimed at influencing public policies, societal attitudes, and socio-political processes that enable and empower the marginalized to speak for themselves” (Samuel, 2002:1).

The ultimate goal of advocacy, whether focusing on media specifically or communication more comprehensively, is to change policy (Dutta 2011; Servaes and Malikhao 2012). Pattie and Johnston (2008) argue that advocacy, as part of democratic debate, relies on persuasion to alter the minds and behaviors of publics, even if they believe it is a less optimal form of communication than two-
way communication or dialogue. To this end, the UNICEF report about “Social Mobilization, Advocacy and Communication for Nutrition” (2014:4) explains that advocacy works best when it combines evidence and analysis, engaging messages and a strategy to identify and influence those who can deliver the change. Tools that rely on stories and evidence to communicate the problem, the urgency of addressing it and the programmatic and policy solutions can convince decision makers as well as those who can influence them about the need to take concrete actions.

In the case of decentralization in Tunisia, advocacy aims to place this reform as a priority on the political and development agenda and foster political will to engage with it by adopting the electoral law and the code of local authorities. To this end, Mourakiboun’s advocacy on Facebook also implies civic engagement at it aims to encourage youth to participate to May 6th, 2018 local elections, the first ones since 2011 uprising, considering their decreasing level of interest in public debate and elections. Indeed, through these efforts of education and awareness, nonprofits provide a catalyst to get individuals engaged with local issues or problems, or to engage with the experiences of certain marginalized community members (Handy et al., 2014:69).

Civic engagement has become a central concern for CSOs, considering that they can have a direct and an indirect effect on citizen participation in public debate. Rogers et al. (2017:2) consider civic engagement as a form of social mobilization, defined as the effort to marshal many people to perform behaviors that impose a net cost on each individual complying and providing negligible collective benefit unless performed by a large number of individuals. Civic engagement is also defined as the multitude of ways that citizens participate in their communities in order to shape the future of their community and improve the conditions of other community members (Adler and Goggin, 2005:241). In the case of voting in elections, the action of an individual may be meaningless, and public benefits only emerge when many people perform the behavior (Rogers et al., 2017:3). It gives them the possibility to monitor the progress of infrastructure and other projects and hold elected councilors accountable. It is important to note that a great part of the collective action that may be defined as political at the local level relies on ordinary citizens’ voluntary contributing time and resources (Klesner; 2007:2).

Advocacy may be a tool to promote civic engagement, though Putnam (2002, in Uhsemmann; 2016:23) emphasizes the importance of trust and reciprocity within social networks and individuals. Yet, he argues that face-to-face interactions can connect people with diverse opinions and backgrounds, while online interactions happen among like-minded people (Ibid, p25). Mourakiboun resorted to advocacy campaigning to sensitize the population about the importance of decentralization and get them to participate in the elections. Nonetheless, media advocacy theories argue that campaigns are not the panacea not only because their effectiveness is questionable but also because they ignore the social causes of unhealthy behavior (Waisbord; 2001:25). The efficiency of Mourakiboun campaign on its Facebook page will be further discussed in the analysis section.

4. Methodology

Considering age and gender factors, this research aims to understand, which category Mourakiboun’s advocacy for decentralization reform and local elections in 2018 through Facebook had attracted the most. In this sense, it is important to note that decentralization reform is new in Tunisia and that it is still not clear in people’s mind. During the former regime, municipalities had a very limited role and didn’t cover the whole national territory. Mourakiboun’s survey (2017:24) about the perception of citizens’ perception of political representation and local elections shows that 69.3% of interviewed persons are not aware that municipal zones are now covering the whole national territory. Furthermore, 77.9% of interviewed persons are not aware that the code of local authorities extends the prerogatives of municipalities (ibid).
4.1 Choice of the period of data analysis

The present study combines quantitative and qualitative research methods, with quantitative data analysis to focus on the statistical analysis of posts published on Mourakiboun’s Facebook throughout 2018.

During that year, decentralization and local elections occupied a significant place in public debate, either on Facebook, audiovisual or written media, especially that the date for the first free and fair local elections was officially fixed. Nonetheless, CSOs, including Mourakiboun, did not start advocating for the decentralization reform and local elections in 2018, rather accelerating the pace of their communication. Given that local elections were postponed several times, CSOs were maintaining a continuous minimum level of advocacy about these two interlinked topics. In parallel, there were other topical issues which attracted the focus of the population, besides of the posting of content related to Mourakiboun’s other activities, such as study on the accountability of public and private health services. Consequently, advocacy for decentralization and local elections was not steady throughout 2018. Instead, it can be split into different phases.

The study will focus on the analysis of post published during specific periods, in view to answer the first sub-research question:

- Which are the periods during which users interacted the most with Mourakiboun’s content related to decentralization and local elections?

The following graph shows the evolution of Mourakiboun’s page likes, regardless of age and gender, throughout 2018:

Based on this graph, the analysis will focus on five periods which could be split as follows:

1) From January 1st to 6th, 2018 (Period 1): This period corresponds to the last week of the third voter registration campaign which started on December 19th, 2017. During that period, Mourakiboun did not extensively communicate to encourage citizens to register to vote in the local election because they were delayed several times. Due to this, both CSOs
and the population in general lost attention in this topic. There were three posts related to
decentralization and local elections in that period. In the first one, Mourakiboun reposted
the link to the survey it has conducted in 2017 about citizen’s perception of political
representation and local elections. The second one is an awareness-raising video targeting
those who did not register yet to vote in May's local elections. It was published on January
4th, 2018, two days before the end of the registration period and has been liked 598 times,
commented 418 times, shared 276 times and viewed more than 139,000 times. The third
one is a link to an interview in the website of LeTemps, a Tunisian newspaper in French,
where Mourakiboun’s general coordinator comments the electoral law.

2) From February 7th to 19th, 2018 (Period 2): Mourakiboun published several posts about
official documents required for those who want to register in candidates lists, to run for
elections whether with political parties, coalitions or independent lists. In addition, it has
posted three awareness-raising videos about the prerogatives of municipal councils as
detailed in draft of the code of local authorities.9 The targeted audience is limited to those
interested in running for the elections, including almost 30,000 18-35 year olds candidates,
who represent 52%10 of the total number of candidates, and that might explain why the
reach of posts published during this period was the second least important compared to
other analyzed periods. However, Facebook data show that users interaction with the page
was consequent, with 18-34 year olds engagement representing respectively 29.5% of total
engagement for that period.

3) From April 4th to May 28th, 2018 (Period 3): During this period, Mourakiboun’s activity
on Facebook was fully focused on decentralization and local elections. This period includes
three Election Days,11 it starts before the official electoral campaign period12, and ends with
the publication of a report related to the observation of the by-elections and the results
announcement. Posts published during this period include two advocacy campaigns; the
first one is a series of Vox-pop videos named "If you were the President of the Municipal
Council." Mourakiboun gave voice to citizens representing 16 governorates13 to know more
about their expectation and how they perceive the role of municipal councils. In total, these
16 videos was viewed more than 2,500,000 times.14 The second one is a series of 5
awareness videos named “One minute of elections with Mourakiboun” which explains
notions related to decentralization and local elections, such as municipal districts and
prerogatives of the municipal councils. In total, these videos was seen more than 1,937,000
times.

Additionally, Mourakiboun started two contests. In the first one, fans had to comment on
the post announcing it whether May 6th, 2018 local elections were “#useful” or “#useless.”
The users with the most of comments win tablet Smartphones. Consequently, the post
generated 113 likes, 180 shares and more than 3,500 comments. In the second contest, fans
had to record videos explaining what they would do in case of heading municipal councils.
The 3 most shared videos win Smartphone tablets. This post generated more than 7,700
likes, 472 shares and was commented more than 1,100 times.

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9 The Code of local authorities was adopted on April 26th, 2018.
10 Retrieved in Webdo (4/5/2018): 52% of candidates to the municipal elections are less than 35 years old [in French].
https://tinyurl.com/y6auysl9
11 the Election Day for bearing arms forces on April 29th, the general elections on May 6th and by-
elections in the municipal
district of Mdhilla, Gafsa held on May 27th, which were postponed due to incidents on May 6th election day.
12 Which lasted from April 14th to May 4th, 2018
13 Out of 24 governorates in total.
14 This number doesn’t reflect the number of users who had seen the video, rather the number of times the video was
launched.
Furthermore, Mourakiboun announced the creation of a Smartphone app containing information about candidates’ lists in each electoral district. In total, the four posts announcing this app were published on April 6th and May 3rd and generated 10,388 likes, 219 comments and were shared 1,245 times. In addition, other posts announced a concert organized by Mourakiboun to draw youth attention to the elections, along with those related to the observation of the three elections, and results’ announcement.

4) From June 29th to July 13th, 2018 (Period 4): Mourakiboun republished the same three awareness-raising videos that were posted during period 2. These videos were posted few days before the opening ceremonies announcing effective start of municipal councils in early July. In total, these 3 videos gathered 2,812 likes, 74 comments, were shared 2,712 times and viewed more than 759,000 times.

5) From September 18th to 30th, 2018 (Period 5): Mourakiboun launched a Smartphone App which allows users to download the code of local authorities and search for specific articles of the law to develop their understanding of decentralization. This is the second app of Mourakiboun, the first one giving the possibility for users to know more about electoral lists who run for the elections in their respective districts. The post announcing the launch of the app was liked 9,199 times commented 142 times and shared 2,474 times.

When it comes to the choice of the relevant period to analyze Mourakiboun’s posts on Facebook, it would have been possible to focus on the analysis posts published during the three voter registration campaigns. Yet, although Mourakiboun’s actions on the ground were considerable, especially during the first campaign, it did not extensively advocate on Facebook for voter registration, and at the same time, published posts on Facebook did not especially attract fans.

4.2 Research methods

This section gives further insight on the three research methods used in understanding Mourakiboun’s advocacy for decentralization and May 2018 local elections, the first free and fair elections since 2011 major uprising. Quantitative content analysis, besides of qualitative surveys aiming Facebook users and in-depth interviews with Mourakiboun’s representatives, were necessary in answering this master’s thesis research question:

When we look at age groups and gender dynamics, what are the categories Mourakiboun attracted the most with their content related to decentralization and local elections on Facebook throughout 2018?

4.2.1 Quantitative content analysis

Quantitative content analysis aims to answer the second and third sub-research questions:

• How did female users interact with Mourakiboun’s content about decentralization and local elections compared to their male counterparts?

• In view of the uninvolved of young citizens in public debate and their decreasing participation in elections since 2011, how did young users interact with Mourakiboun’s content about decentralization and local elections compared to other age groups?
It measures the impact of posts published throughout 2018 on unique users, divided by gender and age, based on the following three indicators:

1) **The daily evolution of the page likes**: This indicator measures the evolution of the page likes per age group on a daily basis. The hypothesis to be tested is whether the daily variance of page likes means that Facebook users are interested in content posted on that period. For instance, in case a high number of fans had joined the page by liking it on a specific day, this can mean that they were attracted by content published on that day.

2) **Facebook weekly reach**: This indicator is defined as the number of unique users, whether page fans or not, who had content from Mourakiboun's Facebook page enter their screen directly (as they like the page, so it appears on their Facebook feed) or indirectly (for example, through advertising or shared by their friends or other pages they like). Weekly reach refers to the number of persons reached in the last 7 days, and is the only available time scale for this indicator.

3) **People interacting with the page (Weekly basis)**: The indicator refers to the number of unique users creating a "story" and interacting with Mourakiboun's Facebook page, whether they like the page or not. It is the number of physical persons who have engaged with the page and created a story about it. A story is created whenever someone likes the page, likes, comments on, or shares a page post, answers a question asked on the page or responds to an event created by the page, mentions the page, tags the page in a photo, or check into or recommends the location indicated in the page.

The calculation of the ratio People interacting with the page/daily page likes complements this indicator as, for each age group, an estimation of the percentage of unique users interacting with the page out of the number of fans on a daily basis. It should be noted that the number of unique users interacting with the page includes page fans as well as their friends, who can see Mourakiboun's content on their respective walls and which was posted by their friends or other pages they like. They can consequently interact with this content without liking Mourakiboun's Facebook page.

For the three indicators, the focus will be on 18-34 year old male and female users as they represent the most important age group among the population and electors. Since these three indicators are divided by different age groups, it gives the possibility to the potential impact of Mourakiboun posts on decentralization and local elections on 18-34 youth as a part of a greater whole. Apart of that, an overview of 13-17 year old (males and females jointly) Facebook users may be helpful in understanding whether these future potential electors may be interested in the decentralization reform in general. It should be noted that they may participate in the next local elections to be held in 2023, as they will reach the legal age of vote at that time. Apart from these age groups, Facebook data also includes for each of these indicators “unspecified” columns, which shows the number of unique users who did neither specify their age nor their gender on their respective Facebook profiles. These data will not be taken into consideration since they represent less than 0.5% of total data for each of the three indicators.

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15 “Unique users” refers to persons who interact with the Facebook page. For example, if a user comments a post, then deletes it and write another one, only one comment will be counted for that user instead of two. Some other data might be based on “total count” rather than “unique users” and take duplicated actions per user into account. This means that, in the same example, two comments will be counted instead of one.

16 These three indicators are divided by 7 age groups: [13-17], [18-24], [25-34], [35-44], [45-54], [55-64] and +65 year-olds.
4.2.2 In-depth interviews

A first in-depth interview was conducted with Mourakiboun's program director and its decentralization project manager in order to further understand the goals of the CSO and its vision. It was also helpful in knowing more about activities it had undertaken to advocate for decentralization and 2018 local elections. The primary advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods (Boyce & Neale, 2006:3)

Following the quantitative analysis of Mourakiboun's Facebook posts, a second in-depth interview was needed in further understanding the logic behind the communication strategy and what it intends to do in the future to improve its advocacy for the decentralization reform process. This second in-depth interview would be helpful in answering the fourth sub-research question:

- **To which extent the organization's advocacy for decentralization and participation in 2018 local elections on Facebook has raised the interest of youth in these two topics? (According to Mourakiboun)**

However, it was not possible to meet Mourakiboun's representatives to know about their perspective on this matter.

4.2.3 Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis is based on a qualitative survey aiming Facebook users, whether they are Mourakiboun's page fans or not. 26 respondents, of whom 19 are 18-34 years old and 7 aged between 35 and 44 years old participated in the survey from May 9th to 18th, 2019. When it comes to gender, there were 12 male and 14 female respondents. The survey aims to answer the fourth sub-research question:

- **To which extent the organization's advocacy for decentralization and participation in 2018 local elections on Facebook has raised the interest of youth in these two topics? (According to youth)**

While the second in-depth interview gives the perspective of Mourakiboun on the matter, this qualitative survey aims to get the point of view of Facebook users, with a focus on those aged between 18 and 34 years old, from an individual perspective. This research method is exploratory as it helps understanding detailed perception of users from an individual perspective. Some researchers believe survey research to be a wholly quantitative approach. However, data gathered from any survey method may be entirely quantitative, may be largely qualitative, or may be a mixture. For example, open-ended questions on a questionnaire or asked in an interview will produce text that may be analyzed qualitatively (Given; 2008:846).

The choice of Google form allows overcoming geographical barriers and reaching a larger audience, and anonymous responses allow participants to be more comfortable in expressing their respective perceptions on decentralization and local elections as well as on Mourakiboun's advocacy for these two topics. Questions in the survey include the perception of respondents on the advocacy campaigns “If you were the President of the Municipal Council” and “One minute of elections with Mourakiboun” which was conducted on its Facebook page during the electoral campaign period. Also, questions asked in the survey aim to understand whether content posted by Mourakiboun has encouraged them in a first step, to register to vote in the 2018 local elections (for those who didn't before), and then vote on the Election Day.
4.2.4 Limits of chosen research methods

Apart from the aforementioned indicators used in the quantitative content analysis, other ones could be helpful in further understanding the impact of Mourakiboun's advocacy for decentralization and local elections on Facebook. For example, Mourakiboun resorted to advertising campaigns to promote some of its content, and Facebook insights give the possibility to distinguish between organic and paid reach. This helps distinguishing between the number of unique users who had Mourakiboun's posts enter their screen, either through paid or unpaid distribution. However, this data is neither divided by age groups nor by sex. Finally, another interesting indicator shows the number of likes, shares and comments for each post, and thus may be helpful in understanding the interaction of users with Mourakiboun's posts on its Facebook page. However, Facebook doesn't give the possibility to divide this data by age groups and gender.

The chosen indicators help in understanding the trends behind Mourakiboun's advocacy for decentralization and local governance and its impact on Facebook users. While the comparison between post reach and users' interaction with them is helpful in answering the research question, it doesn't show the connotation of this interaction, which may be either positive or negative. For instance, a high number of comments on a specific post don't necessarily mean that users interacted with it in a positive way.

To this end, a quantitative or qualitative content analysis of these comments would have been helpful in clarifying this issue. However, on one hand, acquiring informed consent becomes more problematic the larger the data set is, and can seem virtually impossible in aggregate data containing thousands or even hundreds of thousands of data units (Townsend & Wallace, 2016:6). In all cases, by raising awareness on decentralization and local elections, Mourakiboun helps Facebook users in making an opinion about these two topics, living them free to either agree or disagree with it. This study focuses on the measurement of post outreach and engagement of users, and doesn't necessarily distinguish between positive and negative feedback as both are part of the democratic process.

The indicator related to the measurement of user's engagement, could be measured on a daily, weekly and 28-days basis. In the present research, focus will be on the analysis of data on a weekly basis, as it is the case for post reach because. It should be noted that, except of the period close to May 6th elections, ranging from early April to end of May 2018, Mourakiboun do not post content on a daily basis. This makes it possible for users to interact with published content days after it is posted, and relying on the daily basis indicator would decrease the accuracy of users’ engagement measurement. Its measurement on a 28-days basis would be useful for month-long periods, but except of period 3 which lasts almost two months, all other periods last one or two weeks.

Finally, when it comes to the choice of periods, it should be noted that besides of the chosen ones, Mourakiboun published content related to decentralization and local elections but it did not attract significant audience. For instance, Mourakiboun published five posts between October 8th and November 18th, 2018 about capacity building workshops with members of newly created municipalities. They have averagely generated 27 likes, 2 comments and 4 shares. However, these posts were rather promoting Mourakiboun's activities related to decentralization than aiming to raise the awareness of youth on this topic.
4.3 Social media research ethics

The analysis of social media may be useful in understanding and predicting social behavior as well as identifying public opinions and sentiments on specific issues. Data generated from traffic statistics or searched terms online are helpful to this end, since informational searches often precede an activity and the analysis of hashtags on Facebook or Twitter allows identifying trending topics in addition to opinions on them.

However, as traditional approaches to research ethics do not always pertain to online research given the distinctive characteristics of Internet-mediated communications and behaviors on social networking sites, new ethical challenges emerge when researching data on social media (Salmons; 2014:1). The large data available on social media can help in understanding social phenomenon, but according to Woodfield & Iphohen (2018:4), may create issues related to the possibility of gaining consent, of gathering data without consent/permissions, and the possibilities of linking data to identifiable individuals thereby failing to preserve their anonymity whether they sought it or not.

In accordance to the Tunisian law on the protection of personal data,17 data processing must respect human dignity, privacy and public freedoms, and shall not harm people or their reputation. The present research solely relies on anonymous Facebook data which aims to understand how far Mourakiboun’s posts about decentralization and local elections have reached 18-34 year old male and female youth, and on the other hand, understand how this age group, divided by gender as well, has interacted with these posts. Data collected from Mourakiboun’s Facebook page was gathered upon consent of its program director. It consists of excel tables with daily evolution of figures representing the number of unique users who have liked the page, talking about it or being reached by posted content. The choice of unique users’ data aims to reflect the most faithful image possible of the reality as each unique user represents one person, and collected data doesn’t harm Mourakiboun Facebook page users’ private life. It may neither be associated with persons, nor reflect their personal opinions and beliefs.

In the same logic, respondents of the Google form survey do not indicate their respective names, making collected data anonymous. It aims to understand their interest and understanding of the decentralization reform and the first and free local elections since 2011, which are a major milestone in this ongoing process. Although questions in the survey are related to their participation in the elections, it doesn’t ask them to specify for whom they have voted to, since this information is a personal choice, and has to remain confidential. Also, the description of the Google form survey indicates that asked questions come after an anonymous quantitative analysis of data related to Mourakiboun fan’s perception of content related to the studied subjects.

17 Article 9.
5. Findings and Analysis

The main observations for the five analyzed periods could be summarized in the following points:

- **Throughout 2018, 13-17 year old users, regardless of sex, were the least active age group in term of daily evolution of page likes as well as weekly post reach and interaction.**

The chart here below shows the distribution of users interacting with Mourakiboun’s Facebook page on January 4th, May 6th and September 2018\(^1\) by age:

![Distribution of users interacting with Mourakiboun’s Facebook page per age](image)

This finding could be explained by the fact that high school professors observed a series of strikes from February to April 2018, which directly affects this age group. Professors observed a major rally on April 24th (during the electoral campaign, period 3) to exert pressure on the government for negotiations. The high school professors’ strikes may have contributed in deflecting the attention of this age group from decentralization, even though it is not the only reason of 13-17 year olds’ disinterest in decentralization and local elections.

However, there may other reasons explaining this low interest in decentralization and local affairs, especially that this trend is valid throughout 2018. It should be noted that the electoral law allowed those who celebrate their 18th birthday before May 5th, 2018 (and who were 17 years during period 1) to register to vote so that they can part for the first time in elections.

- **Regardless of age group, figures from Mourakiboun’s Facebook page about users’ interaction show that males are more interested in the decentralization and local elections that their female counterparts, with 18-34 years old males being the most interested.**

Whether in terms of daily new page likes as well as weekly reach and interaction, figures for male age groups for the five analyzed periods approximately represent 65% of total, with a quarter of them being in the 18-34 age group. The figure here below shows the distribution of users interacting with the page per sex and age group over the 5 periods:

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\(^1\) These dates were chosen randomly. The aim of this chart is to show the weak interaction of 13-17 year olds throughout 2018.
This can confirm the results of Mourakiboun’s survey related to the participation of women and youth in public debate and local affairs realized in 2018. It shows that 54.6% of interviewed women are not interested in local affairs, and that 76.7% did not participate in local elections. Also, the elections’ body data related to voter registration show that, in 2018, 70% of eligible male voters are registered, 8% more than their female counterparts.

- Despite Mourakiboun Facebook page statistics’ showing that 18-34 year old males were more interested in decentralization and local affairs, this interest had not been concreted on the ground.

Mourakiboun’s survey (2018) shows that 81.9% 18-35 year old youth, regardless of sex, did not vote in May 6th local elections, despite being the first free and fair local elections and a milestone in the establishment of the decentralization reform on the ground. A survey respondent as part of this masters’ thesis explains that he did not vote because he is dissatisfied with the action of political parties and feel like they don’t represent him. He believes that municipalities can bring a positive impact to his region only if elected councilors are fully aware of their respective roles and have sufficient means to perform their duties, which is still not the case according to him. A 18-34 years old female participant in this master’s qualitative survey declared that:

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“Decentralization is a new experience and I did neither have the opportunity to clearly understand it nor to know to whom to vote for.”

Other respondents declared that they voted only to fulfill their civic duty, even if they are dissatisfied with political parties. Some of them state that decentralization is a new concept in Tunisia and that it could progress faster with a better visibility. When asked whether municipal councils can contribute in improving socio-economic conditions locally, a 35-44 years old male respondent who voted in May 2018 local elections states:

“I don’t think so because municipal councilors’ duties and mandates are still not clear. Municipalities lack of resources to do their job effectively.”

It is important to note that 84.5% of youth and 81.3% of women are dissatisfied with the political situation in the country (ibid), and both youth and women’s main reasons for not voting in the elections are due to a lack of trust in political parties and in the fact that these elections will not change their conditions, which led them to boycott these elections.

- Among the posts related decentralization and local elections, Facebook users engaged the most with the post promoting Mourakiboun’s Smartphone apps about the code of local authorities.

The announcement of this app on September 18th, 2018 has generated 9,199 times, commented 142 times and shared 2,474 times since it has been posted. It attracted more audience than the 102 posts published during period 3. A 18-34 respondent to the qualitative survey as part of the present research declared that:

“What I liked the most was Mourakiboun’s Smartphone apps and infographics about local elections as both help people understanding what decentralization is.”

However, the announcement of the first Smartphone app created by Mourakiboun did not encounter the same success, despite its release a month before the local elections when attention to local elections and decentralization should have been at its top. This app gives information about candidates’ lists in each electoral district, helping voters in choosing the list they would vote to. Two posts was published on April 6th, 2018 and generated together 2628 likes, 121 comments and 938 shares. A second announcement of the same app took place on May 3rd, 3 days before the elections, and had generated 7840 likes, 97 comments and 316 shares. The app was updated with the elections results following their announcement, but Mourakiboun did not communicate about it on its Facebook page. Also, it should be noted that despite the high interaction of users with the release of this first Smartphone app, most comments had a negative connotation, either reporting technical problems or showing their disinterest in local elections.

Besides of these main findings, the main findings for each period are the following:

**Period 1: From January 1st to 6th, 2018**

Elections were delayed several times, and consequently the election body (ISIE) had, under law, to start new voter registration campaigns. Therefore, the three posts related to decentralization and registration to vote in the May 2018 local elections posted in this period did not attract a

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20 As the local elections were delayed several times, ISIE had to start a new voter registration period as stipulated by the electoral law. The first period lasted from June 19th to August 17th, 2017, the second one from November 6th to November 25th and the third one from December 19th, 2017 to January 6th, 2018.
considerable audience due to the loss of interest in this topic. The average daily evolution of page likes for all age groups during this period is the least among the analyzed five periods, with female and male 18-34 year olds respectively having an average of 7 and 15 daily page likes. Besides of that, 13-17 year olds daily evolution of page like was negative during that period, the number of users unliking the page exceeding the one of those liking it.

Despite that Mourakiboun had advertised for its awareness-rising video which targets those who did not register yet to vote in May’s local elections, its reach on weekly basis for 18-34 year olds remained low during period 1. Besides of general disinterest in decentralization and local elections in that period, it should be noted that the video was posted on January 4th, two days before the end of the voter registration campaign.

The video was liked 598 times, commented 418 times, shared 276 times and viewed more than 139,000 times, however, most of comments had a negative connotation, and Facebook users, whether registered to vote before 2018 or those who never did, were calling to boycott the elections due to the lack of trust in government and political parties.

**Period 2: From February 7th to 19th, 2018**

The average daily evolution of page likes for all age groups during this period is the same than the one for period 1. However, it should be noted that although there were 19 posts related to registration in electoral lists for May 2018’s elections, compared to 3 in period one, these posts were technical. They included a handbook for future candidates, a listing of required documents and conditions for public funding of lists. This content was intended for a smaller audience, which the electoral body estimates to 53,855 young candidates, with 52% aged between 18 and 35 year old. A part of that, three awareness raising videos were posted on February 7th, targeting a general public, did not attract audience attention. They have been all together liked 16 times, commented once, shared 12 times and viewed 2092 times.

**Period 3: From April 4th to May 28th, 2018**

In general, all unique users, and in the same way, 18-34 youth liked the page the most between April 4th to May 28th, which corresponds to the period of the electoral campaign, the 3 Election Days and the result announcements. During that period, the average daily evolution of page likes for 18-34 youth was 455 new page likes each day, representing 63.5% of average new daily page likes of all age groups. Female and male 18-34 unique users’ daily page likes respectively reached a peak of 1826 and 3028 new likes on the Election Day.

This high level of interest can be explained by the fact that that audience would like to get information about decentralization and local elections in that electoral period, besides of being attracted to Mourakiboun’s Facebook page through advertising. However, while weekly reach was at its highest for both female and male 18-34 year old users, with an average of 654,465 users reached each day during this period, only 600 female and 864 male young users interacted with the page on a daily basis, both representing 0.4% of reached young users.

Regardless of sex, 18-34 youth liked the page the most compared to other age groups and 13-17 were the least to like, considering that their respective average evolution of page likes represent 63.5% and 0.6% of all age groups as indicated in the following pie chart:

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In this regard, it should be noted that male users, regardless of age, liked the page 1.5 times more than their female counterparts. During period 3, 18-34 males average page likes represent 36% of total page likes during the electoral period, while it is 27.5% for their female counterparts. Besides of that, the percentage of female and male 18-34 users interacting with Mourakiboun’s page out of the number of those reached by its postswas at its highest on April 21th (26.4% for females and 29% for males) and May 6th, the general elections day (28% for females and 31.3% for males).

The only post published on April 21th was a report on electoral campaign observation which did not particularly attract the public. Users could have been interacted with “If you were the President of the Municipal Council” Vox-pop videos filmed in the cities of Tunis and Sfax and posted for a second time on April 16th. Users from these two cities with the largest population in the country strongly interacted with them as they felt directly represented. As a consequence, these videos jointly generated 4000 likes, 317 comments, 873 shares and both were viewed more than 591,000 times. This is besides of two awareness raising videos about municipal districts and electoral campaigning which were also published on April 16th part of the campaign “one minute of elections with Mourakiboun”, and which generated 3,670 likes, 260 comments, 1,516 shares and were viewed more than 830,000 times.

Opinions of participants in the qualitative survey about these two series of awareness raising videos were mixed. On one hand, two female 18-34 years old respondents respectively state that vox-pop videos’ stating is monotonous while the second one thinks that Mourakiboun’s advocacy for decentralization and local elections is not innovative. She thinks that these two series of videos is not enough to raise awareness of citizens on decentralization reform. On the other hand, a 35-44 male respondent considers vox-pop videos as an opportunity to allow citizens to express their concerns and deliver messages to elected municipal councilors and believes that “one minute of elections with Mourakiboun” videos are easy to understand.

**Figure 4: Distribution of average page likes per age group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Likes Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13-17</td>
<td>63.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>19.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>3.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>4.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>8.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+65</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Period 4: From June 29th to July 13th, 2018**

Regardless of sex, the number of 18-34 youth liking the page steadily decreased by 279 likes between periods 3 and 4, and by 623 between periods 4 and 5. A part of young users, the graph below shows that number of page likes increased for all other age groups, except of a slight decline for 13-17 fans between periods 4 and 5. 35-44 year olds recorded the highest increase, with 79 likes between periods 3 and 4 in addition to 202 likes between periods 4 and 5:

![Figure 5: Evolution of net page like per age group](image-url)
The decrease of page likes for 18-34 year old users following the end of period 3 is insignificant compared to new likes the page acquired during the same period, with a peak of 1826 and 3028 new likes respectively for female and male young users on May 6th, the elections day. However, the graph here below shows that the steady decrease of likes for this age group following the end of period 4, is higher than the number of page likes gained in this period:

Following the announcement of the local elections’ final results and the instatement of elected municipal councils, Mourakiboun reposted the three educational videos about the prerogatives of municipal councils which were published on February 2018. Facebook statistics show that advertising, and targeting young users was considerable. Instead, the videos were widely shared (2,712 times) and viewed 759,000 times. Nonetheless, most of audience saw the videos on other Facebook pages groups and profile rather than on Mourakiboun page. Indeed, the weekly page reach during this period was significant, with a mean of 80,117 female and 151,587 male 18-34 unique users, both representing more than 45% of total reached users. Nonetheless, on average only 57 female and 82 male young unique users of this age group, respectively representing 0.32% and 0.37% of young page fans, reacted on these videos on the page.

**Period 5: From September 18th to 30th, 2018**

Unlike users’ behavior in period 4, fans interacted the most with content posted on that period compared to the previous ones, even more than throughout the electoral period (period 3). The mean of unique users of all age groups interacting with the page following the announcement of the release of Mourakiboun’s app about the Code of local authorities counts for more than the double of those who did the same during period 3. Weekly reach of posts published between April 4th and May 28th, 2018 was almost 3 times more important than the one related to the announcement of the Smartphone App Regardless of age and gender.

Nonetheless, this unique post related to decentralization and local governance has raised the interest of audience 2.6 times more than the 102 posts published during period 3. This means that the ratio of Reach/interaction is 8 times higher for period 5 than for period 3, despite the significant difference in the number of published content during the two periods. The graph here
below shows a comparison between weekly page reach and interaction for periods 3 and 5:

![Comparison between user reach and interaction](image)

**Figure 7: Comparison between user reach and interaction (for period 3 and 5)**

During period 5, female and male 18-34 olds youth respectively representing 20.3% and 25% of total audience interacting with the page, while 13-17 year old represented only 0.15% of people talking about the page. The ratio People interacting with the page/daily page likes reached an average of 8% for both 18-34 year old females and males during that period, with a peak of respectively 14.4% and 14.6% on September 24th, a week following the publication of the post. Overall, the post about the app of the Code of local authorities generated 9,199 likes, 142 comments and was shared 2,474 times.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The analysis of *Mourakiboun's* advocacy for decentralization and local elections throughout 2018 on its Facebook page shows an active engagement of users, especially 18-34 year olds with posted content. However, this online engagement did not go in harmony with an active participation of voters in local elections. In fact, according to ISIE, voter turnout reached 33.7%. Another significant finding is the low interest, on *Mourakiboun's* Facebook page, of 13-17 year olds in these two interlinked topics. It remains important to raise their awareness beforehand about the decentralization reform for three main reasons:

1) Decentralization reform is an ongoing process and is not limited to May 2018 elections;

2) Those aged between 13-17 years old will become potential electors in the upcoming 2023 local elections;

3) These 2018 local elections were a good opportunity to advocate for decentralization reform
due to their symbolic significance in the democratic process in Tunisia.

*Mourakiboun* seems to have neglected the [13-17] age group in its advocacy on Facebook, and have opted for a short term perspective by focusing on 18-34 year old users, who represent 65% of total Facebook users in Tunisia. Relying on information and communication technologies (ICT) may contribute to addressing this issue and supporting their advocacy effort. The smartphone app about the Code of Local Authorities released by*Mourakiboun* on September 2018 succeeded in engaging Facebook users. This confirms the role of ICT4D in easing access to information and strengthening communication for development, while taking into consideration that they complement offline field action and do not replace it.

Overall, the present study shows, on one hand a gap between international and CSOs which have an understanding of opportunities and challenges of decentralization, and which advocate and support this reform. On the other hand, the population, especially youth, whose socio-economic expectations had not been fulfilled since 2011 uprising, lost trust in political parties. Besides, they haven't had the opportunity to understand what decentralization is as the Code of Local Authorities was adopted few days before the elections. Consequently, voter turnout was low, and independent candidates “won these elections” and got more votes than major parties. It should be noted that these independent candidates do not represent a uniform group as they come from different backgrounds and a have different objectives.

Despite that decentralization reform process goes slowly and with great difficulties, and despite of citizen's lack of trust in the political class, *Mourakiboun*’s study on political representation and local elections (2017) shows that the population is aware that elected municipal councils with strong prerogatives can have a direct positive impact on their everyday lives. It can contribute in addressing the socio-economic issues which were the cause of 2011 major protests, and reduce the gap between the political class and the population. A first tangible outcome toward this being that, following May 2018 first free and fair local elections, women represent 47% of elected municipal councilors (UN Women:2018), and 37% of them are less than 35 years old.

This master’s thesis is a first attempt to understand advocacy for decentralization and May 6th, 2018 local elections, the first free and fair elections of its kind since 2011 major protests. Communication for decentralization can bring an added value to the field of Communication for Development, as decentralization contributes in fostering local development and empowering communities. To this end, Civil society's role remains important since they ease the implementation of activities at local level, and play a role of mediator between governments and citizens. This study can be the base for further study on advocacy on decentralization and local elections in Tunisia by other CSOs, international ones or media. It is equally interesting to compare the Tunisian case with other experiences in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region, such as Morocco or Jordan, to reveal potential similarities and differences in the advocacy for decentralization in these countries.
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8. Appendix

8.1 Qualitative survey questions

N.B: Survey questions were in Tunisian Arabic to ease understanding of questions. Herebelow is the translation in English:

**Title:** Opinion of fans regarding *Mourakiboun’s advocacy for decentralization and local elections throughout 2018.*

**Introduction:** This survey is realized as part of a masters thesis with Malmö university, Sweden. It discusses *Mourakiboun*’s advocacy for decentralization and local elections of Facebook throughout 2018.

In a first step, a quantitative content analysis of fan’s interaction with content published in 2018 by *Mourakiboun* related to these two interlinked issues had been undertaken. Following that, this survey aims to understand the degree of your interest in the decentralization reform process and local elections, considering that it is an important milestone in this process. This survey is not intended to know for whom you have voted to, considering that this is a personal information, and everyone is free to make his own choices.

The information gathered either through quantitative content analysis or this survey respects your personal privacy, and data will be analyzed anonymously. The fact that you don’t mention your name anywhere in the form is a proff that collected data may not be associated with persons.

This survey is short and simple, and answering questions would take you 5 minutes on average, thank you for your understanding.

**Questions:**

**Q1:** Are you a fan of *Mourakiboun’s Facebook page?*

   Yes/No

**Q2:** How old are you:

   13-17/18-34 / 35-44 / 45-54 / +65

**Q3:** Are you:

   A man / A women?

**Q4:** Please Choose indicate your place of residence (by governorate and city)

**Q5:** Did you vote in May 2018 local elections (whether for a party/coalition/independent list)?
Q6: Why did you participate/ or did not vote in these elections? Could you please explain? [open question]

Q7: Do you have an idea about decentralization reform and May 2018 local elections? Do you think elected municipal councils can contribute in improving the socio-economic conditions in your region? If yes or no, could you please explain why? [open question]

Q8: To which extent posts published by Mourakiboun throughout 2018 (whether videos, reports, photos, etc.) had helped you to get an idea about decentralization reform and May 2018 local elections? [scale question]

- Too much helpful/ reasonably helpful / a bit helpful/ not helpful at all/ I don't know

Q9: Could you please explain your choice? What did you like or dislike in posts published by Mourakiboun about decentralization reform and May 2018 local elections? [open question]

Q10: Were you register to vote before the 2018 municipal elections?

Yes/No

Q11: In case you were not registered to vote, did the posts published by Mourakiboun during the third voter registration campaign encourage you to do so?

Yes/no

Q12: Could you please explain why? [open question]

Q13: What is your opinion regarding the videos “if you were heading a municipal council” published by Mourakiboun between April 14th and May 6th, 2018? [scale question]

- They are amazing / fairly good / could be better / I didn’t like them/ I don’t know

Q14: What did you like or dislike in those videos? [open question]

Q15: What is your opinion regarding awareness-raising videos “one minute of elections with Mourakiboun” which simplifies concepts related to the decentralization reform and which had been also published during the electoral campaign period? [scale question]

- They are amazing / fairly good / could be better / I didn’t like them/ I don’t know
Q16: To which extent these awareness-raising videos let you understand the decentralization reform and the importance of local elections? [open question]

Q17: In general, did Mourakiboun's awareness-raising campaign encouraged you to vote in May 2018 local elections?

Yes/No

Q18: Could you explain why? [open question]