

Youth Empowerment: Youth Movements for the Promotion of Human Rights

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Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue: *Summer Internship*

October, 2022

Abstract

This paper presents an investigation of youth empowerment through and for the promotion of human rights. In exploring three distinct case studies that highlight the powerful role of youth groups and movements in regards to securing human rights, this paper draws that youth promotion of human rights ultimately empowers the general youth. The case studies presented pertain to the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, as well as the Tamarod Rebellion of 2013.

Additionally, this paper investigates the role of youth groups in Belarus, and the individual case of Malala's fight for equal education. Ultimately, this paper outlines the significance of youth empowerment through the aforementioned case studies and underlines its connection to youth movements and human rights.

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Introduction

I. Importance of Youth Empowerment and Human Rights

The term empowerment is frequently used in contemporary political affairs to denote the adoption and internalisation of power within an individual, or group of individuals, in realising one's sovereignty and agency to determine and exercise their fundamental rights and freedom¹. Thus, the term 'youth empowerment' is used to express the action of claiming agency and autonomy by young people who use determined action to secure a more informed, active and independent consciousness, in addition to gaining the ability and power to take charge of their lives and direct positive and forceful change for themselves and society.

The ever-growing importance of youth empowerment has been discussed by scholar Albert Melucci who underscores the "biological and cultural condition"² of the youth, in that, they are inevitably coerced to bear the brunt of social dilemmas due to their inherent visibility and exposure to societal issues as a key group in society managing everyday interactions on a large scale. This notion sparks conversation with scholar Kurebwa who proposes that youth is a "socially constructed life stage rather than simply a chronological age"³. Both authors raise the notion that young people, in general, embody a socially defined life in constant engagement with

¹ Lanre Olusola, "Importance of Youth Empowerment in 21st Century | the Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News," The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News, April 18, 2019, <https://guardian.ng/features/importance-of-youth-empowerment-in-21st-century/>.

² Melucci, Alberto. "Youth, Time and Social Movements." *YOUNG* 4, no. 2 (May 1996): 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/110330889600400202>, 7.

³ IGI Global. *Participation of Young People in Governance Processes in Africa*. Edited by Jeffrey Kurebwa and Obadiah Dodo. INSERT-MISSING-SERVICE-NAME. Hershey, Pennsylvania (701 E. Chocolate Avenue, Hershey, Pennsylvania, 17033, USA): IGI Global, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-9388-1>. Xvi.

societal issues, while navigating “a complex interplay of both personal and socio-economic changes”⁴, leading to the emergence of youth being a powerful dynamic in the composition of society. The importance of youth empowerment is further asserted by Henry A. Giroux who outlines the imminent vulnerability of the youth who will be condemned to live the social, economic and political consequences of societal issues if not for the seizure and championing of youth empowerment expressed through mobilisation and activism⁵. Thus, youth empowerment is presented as a prominent aspect of a growing and progressive society, and its importance is further underscored in the inherent correlation between youth empowerment and the promotion of human rights.

Human rights are defined by four key characteristics, “universal, inalienable, indivisible and interdependent”⁶, as per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in Paris on 10th December, 1948⁷. This essay’s objective is to draw attention to the importance of youth empowerment in relation to the promotion of human rights. More specifically, this essay seeks to emphasise the *irrefutable* correlation between youth empowerment and youth promotion of human rights, such that youth activism and mobilisation inadvertently leads to youth empowerment by amplifying the voice of the youth and presenting them as a significant, influential and active agency in society. This will be conveyed through the exploration and analysis of detailed case studies reflecting the leading role of the youth in advocating for change and human rights in their respective countries. It will be demonstrated that

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Giroux, Henry A. “Occupy Wall Street’s Battle against American-Style Authoritarianism.” *Fast Capitalism* 9, no. 1 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.32855/fcapital.201201.004>, 122.

⁶ United Nations Human Rights, “OHCHR | What Are Human Rights?,” OHCHR, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights>.

⁷ Ibid.

as the youth dominated the fight for human rights, they achieved empowerment by recognising their rights and demanding its provision by the government. Although the scope of this essay is limited to only a few case studies with further shortcomings of limited resources, this essay will explore youth promotion of human rights and its correlation with youth empowerment through an investigation of three different case studies. Principally, investigating the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 provides valuable context for the succeeding revolution of 2013, in which both outline and demonstrate the pertinent and powerful role of the youth in shaping sociopolitical outcomes and demanding the provision of rights. Secondly, examining the prominence of youth groups in Belarus in the aftermath of the Cold War elucidates their defining role in fostering youth empowerment, such that youth advocacy and promotion of human rights seeks to include and educate wider youth groups, and thus bolster political change. Finally, the individual case of Malala's fight for education illustrates the power of youth empowerment on a global scale, where Malala's ideas and actions in seeking youth empowerment through education create broader implications for youth worldwide in achieving their own empowerment through seeking access to human rights. All in all, these case studies illustrate the dire importance of youth empowerment and the productive benefits of youth empowerment that link to fighting for and securing human rights.

II. Background: Historical Context of Youth Empowerment

Historically, in the negotiations or fight for human rights between a civil society and its government, the youth have demonstrated their willingness and determination to represent the voice of society in demanding fair access to human rights. This has been evidenced in the Cold War where the youth sparked political change and reform in countries of the former Eastern bloc,

as mass youth movements demanded the end of censorship and authoritarianism. The momentum generated by the youth of Eastern European countries drove the change to democracy in former Communist countries, demonstrating the power of the youth⁸. The significance of the youth is further reflected in movements such as the Suffrage Movement of the early 20th century where university students played a noteworthy role in mobilising to secure a woman's right to vote. The voice of the youth continues to hold prominence in modern society as current political issues regarding fundamental human rights such as gun reform, reproductive rights, racial equality and the climate crisis are being forcefully demanded by youth all across the world. Conclusively, it is clear that the youth play a crucial role in the promotion and advocacy of human rights, and their agency displayed in mobilisation inevitably generates empowerment.

Case Studies

I. Egypt: Youth Empowerment through Social Revolutions

The 2011 Egyptian Revolution marked one of the most significant events in democratic history, in which a severely oppressive and autocratic regime was overturned upon the mass collectivisation and mobilisation of civil society. The Egyptian Revolution exemplifies the indisputable force of the youth, as youth groups relentlessly persevered to express and channel their voice and demands through organised movements and mass demonstrations that ultimately propelled the Egyptian Revolution⁹. The youth role in bolstering the Egyptian Revolution is underscored by scholar Nadine Abdalla who asserts youth activists remained “the core”¹⁰ of the

⁸ Mark R. Beissinger, "Promoting Democracy: Is Exporting Revolution a Constructive Strategy?" *Dissent* 53, no. 1 (2006): 18-24, doi:10.1353/dss.2006.0090, 18.

⁹ Khalid Ali, "Precursors of the Egyptian Revolution," *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 1 (January 2012): 16–25, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2012.00286.x>, 16.

¹⁰ Nadine Abdalla, "Youth Movements in the Egyptian Transformation: Strategies and Repertoires of Political Participation," *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no. 1 (October 7, 2015): 44–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081445>, 44.

revolution in initiating and directing mass protests and demonstrations. It is further asserted that the revolutionary 25 January uprising may be accredited to the mobilisation of youth groups in instigating mass revolts against the state that ultimately toppled Hosni Mubarak's repressive military regime¹¹. In this manner the Egyptian youth exhibit their inclination and ability to address domestic social, political and civil issues¹², and further display skills and strategies of organisation, mobilisation and resolution to fortify their voices, thus demonstrating the power of youth groups in mobilising a society. Furthermore, youth promotion and advocacy of human rights in Egypt enabled them to claim a greater presence in the political sphere, and endowed them with a more conclusive influence on sociopolitical affairs, hence demonstrating the empowerment of Egyptian youth who gain agency and influence in social dynamics¹³. To that respect, the Egyptian Revolution presents a noteworthy case of youth mobilisation and youth empowerment by presenting the powerful dimensions of the sociopolitical magnitude of an empowered youth which has the power to topple a regime and contend for the provision of human rights.

The above examination of the youth role in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution provides context for the events of the 2013 Tamarod Rebellion, where the Arab Spring left an empowered and politically immersed youth group in Egypt who played an active role in mobilising against the former regime. As accentuated by scholar Khalid Ali, past protests provide defining precursors that enable and fortify future movements in carrying the forces and power of previous revolutions¹⁴. In addition, Abdalla supports this notion in acknowledging the emergence of the Tamarod Rebellion with respect to the political environment conditioned by events of the 2011

¹¹ Abdalla, 44.

¹² Ali, 16.

¹³ Abdalla, 47.

¹⁴ Ibid, 23.

youth revolutions. Thus, the legacy of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution embedded remnants of political strife among the youth who demonstrated their determination to secure human rights by continuing to challenge the new, “democratically elected”¹⁵ president Mohamed Morsi.

The success of the Arab Spring saw Egypt’s first non-military figure take office through rounds of democratic elections in 2012¹⁶, however sociopolitical goals of civil liberty and social justice¹⁷ were yet to be achieved under Morsi’s regime that encapsulated dimensions of religious and military rule. To that respect, youth groups and movements persisted and continued to demonstrate, seeking civil, political and domestic rights. The power of youth movements is distinctly evident in the unprecedented force and magnitude of the 2013 Tamarod Rebellion, where the youth exclusively directed the mobilisation of “22 million”¹⁸ in opposition to Morsi’s government. Here, the unmatched power of the youth is demonstrated and underscores the dire importance of youth empowerment in a society. An empowered youth, as presented in the case of Egypt, demonstrates the capacity, determination, and willingness to seek and ensure access to human rights and justice, thus highlighting the significance of youth empowerment in the provision of human rights. In regards to individual and collective capacity, youth empowerment holds immense value in enabling individuals to bolster strategic capacity and organisational cohesion to maximise their skills, knowledge and voice in attaining their goals. Thus, youth empowerment holds powerful dimensions in developing the consciousness and abilities of an

¹⁵ Mariz Tadros, “Participation Not Domination: Morsi on an Impossible Mission?,” in *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 15–35, <https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1515/9781474419277-005>, 19.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Limor Lavie, “Arm-Wrestling (Round 2) Civil State vs. Civil State with an Islamic Source of Authority (2012–2014),” in *The Battle over a Civil State: Egypt’s Road to June 30, 2013* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 87–118, 99.

¹⁸ Ibid, 97.

individual, and additionally in generating societal benefits as young individuals are empowered with the awareness and inclination to address, and somewhat amend critical human rights issues. The youth movements in Egypt hold broader implications for youth empowerment in Egyptian society by fostering a general consciousness of civil, political and human rights and enforcing the momentum of past revolutions, such that the legacy and force of the fight for rights may be intrinsic to the social composition of youth in society.

II. Belarus: The Mobilisation of Youth Groups

As aforementioned, the end of the Cold War brought an upsurge of mass youth movements across Eastern European countries who were austere governed under autocratic Communist rule as part of the Soviet bloc. Nations such as Belarus, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine saw youth empowerment as youth groups rose and mobilised against the state in efforts to democratise regimes built on violence and censorship. In mobilising against the state, Eastern European youth demanded the fundamental human right to life, liberty and security, as well as the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and expression¹⁹. Thus, through actively engaging in the promotion of human rights, the youth of Eastern European countries were empowered by recognising their rights as humans, as well as citizens, and forcefully demanding their acceptance. This case study of Eastern European youth movements is centralised in Belarus, where youth groups dominated the fight for democracy and human rights.

¹⁹ United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations (United Nations, December 10, 1948), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

Belarus attained its independence from the Soviet Union following the superpower's collapse in 1991, allowing the nation state "a brief period of political liberalisation"²⁰ where the opportunity for the establishment of a free and fair democracy emerged. However, aspirations of a promising democracy soon met their demise as the candidate Alyaksandr Lukashenka was elected as President in 1994. The dispersion of political fear through an abrasive security apparatus that targeted and eradicated opposition was a key feature of Lukashenka's oppressive regime. Political fear and repression was further instilled in Lukashenka's regime through censorship and the demobilisation of NGOs. In this manner, citizens were massively deprived of private media and sources of information, creating a politically weak civil society. In this light, youth movements emerged to encourage voting in the 2001 election in order to usher in democratic change and reform. Although the mobility of youth movements was restricted by the limited political opportunity structure of Belarus²¹, inhibited by censorship and a violent regime, youth movements of Belarus demonstrate and foster youth empowerment by highlighting the voice of the youth and drawing it to the centre stage of Belarusian politics demanding change.

The emergence of two key youth groups has been emphasised by scholar Olena Nikolayenko due to their influential role in mobilising the youth and wider civil society of Belarus to recognise their rights and enforce democratic change. *Malady Front* and *Zubr* both represent determined and politically driven youth groups in Belarus that outwardly asserted and claimed the importance of democracy and human rights recognition by the state. Both groups

²⁰ Nikolayenko, Olena. "Youth Movements and Elections in Belarus." *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 3 (March 16, 2015): 468–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1018870>, 469.

²¹ Nikolayenko, Olena. "Youth Movements and Elections in Belarus." *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 3 (March 16, 2015): 468–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1018870>, 474.

utilised Belarusian culture and symbols²² to appeal to the youth and encourage patriotism and a sense of belonging to unite the youth in their shared vision of a free and democratic Belarus. With the principal aim of encouraging youth participation in voting, *Malady Front* and *Zubr* encourage youth empowerment by highlighting the youth voice for political change and enabling them to reclaim their power by casting their vote in the upcoming election. Moreover, *Malady Front* further sought to empower the youth by forming the Congress of Belarussian Youth to “bring together all youth organisations in opposition to the regime”²³. In this manner, they expand the voice of the youth and usher empowerment by endowing a platform to the youth who seek change. Through the formation of the Congress of the Belarusian Youth, youth groups were able to express their specific demands via drafts and resolutions pertaining to governmental provision of human rights in order to ensure freedom and an acceptable standard of living for Belarusian citizens²⁴. Thus, *Malady Front* exhibits youth empowerment in mobilising youth against a repressive regime and asserting youth agency. Additionally, *Zubr* enabled youth empowerment by creating a politically informed youth in Belarus. By drawing attention to the limited and censored provision of education, *Zubr* calls on the youth to question their sources of information, thus encouraging the empowerment of Belarusian youth who may be mobilised to seek a higher quality of education that is reliable and promising. All in all, the case study of Belarus highlights the powerful nature of youth groups in a society who, by seeking greater access to rights of education, freedom and democracy, may empower themselves and wider

²² Nikolayenko, Olena. “Youth Movements and Elections in Belarus.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 3 (March 16, 2015): 468–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1018870>, 475.

²³ Nikolayenko, Olena. “Youth Movements and Elections in Belarus.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 3 (March 16, 2015): 468–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1018870>, 476.

²⁴ Ibid.

society by claiming space in the sociopolitical center, and demonstrating an awareness and determination for fair and equal access to human rights. In this manner, the importance of youth groups in the context of youth empowerment is underlined in their ability to usher change and positively impact and educate wider society in mobilising towards collective goals of human rights and democracy.

III. Malala: Youth Empowerment in the Fight for Education

Malala Yousafzai is the winner of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize and is widely accoladed as the champion of women's right to education on a global scale. At the mere age of 13, she became a globally recognised youth activist as her fight for education in Pakistan resulted in a tragic war with the Taliban who prohibited girls' access to education. This essay has looked at youth revolutions in mass mobilisation against a state, however the case of Malala presents youth empowerment championed by a single youth activist who gained international attention for her unfortunate and almost fatal encounter with the Taliban. Malala demonstrated determination, agency and empowerment within Pakistan as she fought for girls' right to education, and sought to further empower youth on a global scale by establishing *The Malala Fund*²⁵, dedicated to securing equal access to education for girls all around the world. .

Malala asserts her agency as a youth activist within her hometown in Pashtun, Pakistan where she openly defied the Taliban who created gendered barriers in Pakistani society that severely diminished the role of women and subjugated them to household duties. Malala continuously fought against these repressive demands and frequently expressed her opinions on public platforms such as local radio stations in Pakistan, as well as through anonymous articles

²⁵ Malala Yousafzai, "Malala Fund | Working for a World Where All Girls Can Learn and Lead," Malala.org, 2019, <https://malala.org/>.

for the BBC²⁶. By fighting for her, and her peer's right to education, Malala asserts her agency and asserts her empowerment by recognising and demanding her right to education. Moreover, Malala further asserts this agency through establishing the Malala Fund, an organisation committed to ensuring girls' access to education in various developing countries where gender discrimination results in the marginalisation of women in society, thus endowing herself with an international platform in which she can spark change.

Malala has demonstrated achieving self-empowerment as a youth activist in her determined action to seize power by creating an organisation aligned with her values and beliefs pertaining to youth access to education. She further enforces youth empowerment in general terms by seeking to better access to education to those deprived of it, thus creating an informed youth equipped with the knowledge and drive to seek further aspirations and forms of empowerment. Furthermore, she propels her ideas for change and reform on a global scale by emphasising the importance of education in youth empowerment, thus creating ripples across the globe with respect to enforcing the right to equal education²⁷. With regard to looking forward, Malala's ideas for the growth and sustenance of youth empowerment are centred around using education to empower youth and wider society in realising one's rights, and continually seeking to maximise the exercise of their rights. According to Malala, engaging in violent conflict does not lead to a fruitful solution in cases of fighting for rights in an environment of constraint and

²⁶ Phyllis Mentzel Ryder, "Beyond Critique: Global Activism and the Case of Malala Yousafzai," *Literacy in Composition Studies* 3, no. 1 (March 15, 2015): 175–87, <https://doi.org/10.21623/1.3.1.14>, 178.

²⁷ Ryder, 181.

authoritarianism. Instead, redirecting efforts to education and meaningful dialogue is a more impactful solution in the long run, and is key to fostering youth empowerment on a wider scale²⁸.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has explored and demonstrated the ways in which youth empowerment may be fostered through the advocacy and promotion of human rights, as led by youth groups and movements. The investigation of the 2011 and 2013 Egyptian Revolution demonstrated the undeniable force of the youth in their capacity to overturn an unjust government and seek democratic and civil change. Youth empowerment is particularly exemplified through the case study of Egypt, as the youth display their capabilities and agency to determine their political rights, civil liberties, and overall access to human rights. In this manner, it is the mobilisation of collective youth action that leads to youth empowerment which ultimately allows Egyptian youth to take charge of their sociopolitical rights and ambitions. Additionally, through the investigation of the Belarus youth groups and their role and influence in educating and mobilising Belarusian youth, the promotion of youth empowerment is evident as *Zubr and Malady Front* create a greater social and political awareness among Belarusian youth, and additionally encourage their political participation. Thus, the promotion of human rights in Belarus led to the creation of a more conscious, aware and determined youth group motivated to command and direct their own futures through political participation, hence underlining the role of human rights in fostering youth empowerment. Finally, Malala's fight for education on a global scale highlights the inextricable link between education and youth empowerment, in which education essentially remains a precondition to empowerment. In

²⁸ Ibid.

advocating for equal access to education, Malala emanates ideas of empowerment, not only for herself as an individual involved in the promotion of human rights, but for the general youth who are empowered through gaining knowledge and means of self-sufficiency. All in all, the correlation between human rights and youth empowerment is sufficiently evident, therefore it is crucial that youth empowerment remains a priority in social development. Youth empowerment not only holds dimensions of value for the youth themselves, but may uplift and strengthen civil societies as demonstrated in the aforementioned case studies.

As the importance of youth empowerment has been clearly defined, it is imperative that governments seek to maintain and strengthen youth empowerment in the future. In conducting policies that include youth groups and decision-making, governments may ascertain youth empowerment by providing an agency and platform to the youth. Additionally, by ensuring the provision of education and fundamental resources, youth empowerment may be further strengthened as an educated youth holds the power of an unmistakable sense of confidence, security and self-worth attained from having gained knowledge. Empowered with awareness and confidence, youth groups may have a stronger inclination to recognise and fight for their rights and are additionally more likely to succeed with the power, strength and determination they gain with an active sociopolitical mind.

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