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Mohammed Kubati

- 1 Turkey is considered to be one of the most attractive destinations for international students. The Council of Higher Education in Turkey (YÖK) has reported that the number of international students in Turkey reached 185,047 in the academic year 2019-2020, many of whom come from Middle Eastern countries. According to the same statistical survey by YÖK (2020), the number of Yemeni students in Turkey reached 4386 in the academic year 2019-2020, when in 2013-2014 that figure did not exceed 330. This drastic increase in student numbers led Yemeni students to form small communities in cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Konya. As a result, they established student unions in cities such as Ankara in 2013 and Istanbul in 2014, finally establishing the Yemeni students' union in Turkey (*Yemeni Öğrenciler Derneği Türkiye* – YÖDT) in 2016. Today, the Yemeni students' union in Turkey has 35 branches all over Turkey which hold yearly elections for their respective administrative boards. The Istanbul branch, which is the largest, held its most recent election, opened to all Yemeni students, in October 2020 in which over 250 students participated, even though the number of Yemeni students in Istanbul reached 1228 last academic year according to the aforementioned report. Moreover, as a precedent in the history of YÖDT – Istanbul, a woman was elected. This event triggered the researcher –who is at the same time one of the founding members of YÖDT– to investigate the voting behaviour of Yemeni students in Istanbul in order to understand voters' choice of candidates.
- 2 Democratic process in the Republic of Yemen has been rescinded since 2006 –if we exclude the mock elections in 2012 which resulted to the accession of Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi to the presidency. Subsequently, a whole generation of first-time voters has been deprived of any opportunity to participate in a national election. This deprivation of democratic practices of this young generation left them with few democratic practices in their communities. Therefore, in this case study, the student

election in Yemeni student unions abroad is the only democratic practice that university students have experienced to date and which ensures a minimal level of democratic consciousness among them. Thus, since we know almost nothing about the electoral behaviour of this young generation and their political tendencies, it is important to examine their electoral practices at the individual level.

- 3 This paper aims to examine the voting behaviour of Yemeni students in Istanbul in order to isolate influential factors in the elector's decision. Student election is one of the most important activities that students have in university life since it trains students for democratic practices and enhances their performance in social activities. However, it has been noted that there is an absence of research in this field in Yemeni society. The paper highlights the attitudes of Yemeni youth toward elections, which may also give some insight into the students' future engagement in politics.

Literature review

- 4 The electoral behaviour of youths in student governments in various educational institutions has caught the attention of many researchers who study electoral behaviour. Many emphasise the educational role student participation plays in democratic practices (Al-Salîm 2014). In this regard, Saha & Print (2010) argue that participation in student governments is primordial for college students to engage civically as it provides them with exposure to the democratic process, which in turn increases the likelihood of involvement in civic and political life as adults. Most studies on student electoral behaviour have been conducted in North American colleges and universities. However, it is worth mentioning that most of these studies, in the United States as well as in other countries, have tended to focus more on the issue of participation in student elections in an attempt to investigate the reasons behind low election turnout. Furthermore, most studies on student electoral behaviour in student governments use quantitative methods to examine certain correlations. MENA region notably lacks studies of this kind.
- 5 In 2016, Abdullah Al-Harbî conducted a study on Saudi students' club elections in the United Kingdom with the purpose of exploring the nature of the participation of around 1200 Saudi students. Following a quantitative methodology, around 1200 students participated in the survey. The findings of this study are quite inspiring as it shows a moderate correlation between the turnout and the personality factor, which can be used in my study. Moreover, this study bears similarities to my own. First, it was conducted in a foreign country. Second, the student club is independent from the educational institution. Third, Saudi and Yemeni societies share common characteristics. However, differences exist, the most salient being the democratic sphere and its practices in the countries of origin. Ahmed Helal & Eid Abo Hamza (2015) focus on university students in Egypt. Yemen and Egypt share some characteristics in terms of the democratic sphere. Both countries are republics with supposedly fair elections, and political pluralism. However, both suffer from human rights violations and the absence of democratic practices, a situation which has worsened since the Arab Spring. Therefore, the study provides us with a better understanding of political behaviour determinants on the individual and society in such radical transformation periods in Egypt and the Arab region after the Arab Spring. They aim to question the relationship between political efficacy, voting behaviour and partisanship by means of

a survey taken by 255 university students. The researchers' theoretical framework is based on the rational choice theory and Newman and Sheth's model of primary voter behaviour which can be useful for my own study. However, the major hypotheses of correlation between political efficacy and voting behaviour were refuted in the results. Relevantly, Bashar Al-Salîm's quantitative study (2016) conducted in Jordan to explore the level of democratic practices and trends towards political participation by student councils in Jordanian universities shows a high level of democratic practices among student councils in Jordanian universities combined with a moderate level of political participation. While gender has no statistically significant effect on democratic practices, there were statistically significant differences in favour of state universities and the Humanities. In light of these findings, we might be able to utilise some of them to understand political trends among Yemeni students and their effect on voting behaviour in student elections. Regional affiliations, as studied in Watfah (2012) is another concept that might have validity for this study. Watfah contends that Arab voters often base their choices on the identity of people and on traditional affiliations of tribal/regional significance, which reflects the process of transforming electoral practices into a process that imposes traditional values. Although I think that tribal affiliations in my case are not prevalent, regional affiliation can have an influence on Yemenis' electoral behaviour.

- 6 Among the few qualitative studies available, the most informative is Jennifer Fox's 2017 doctoral dissertation. It aims to understand the experiences of ten candidates for the positions of president and vice president and their perception of political efficacy in student government elections in the United States. It investigates why students choose to run in student government elections, how they perceived their experiences, and how they described their sense of political efficacy as a result of their candidacy. The significance of the study stems from it focusing on the unique experiences of student candidates in student government elections where most studies either examine student government elections through voter turnout or delve into student government participation post-election. The utilisation of the notion of political efficacy in the study was efficient and can help us to understand voters' attitudes towards the candidates and their perceived self-efficacy.

Methodology

- 7 This study focuses on the Istanbul branch of YÖDT (*Yemenli Öğrenciler Derneği – Türkiye*), the largest branch of the union member-wise. The election of a woman for the presidency with the largest number of votes is a precedent in the history of YÖDT-Istanbul. This qualitative study combines two methods. First, participant observation during union activities. Second, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with a limited number of union members. The participants were chosen according to diversity and representativity criteria.
- 8 My involvement with YÖDT-Istanbul, first as a founding member since 2015 and then as the president for two years (2016-2018), allowed me the opportunity to interact with a large number of members during the election process. Besides, my participation in the supervisory committee for the Istanbul branch during the years 2019-2020 is the main incentive for conducting this research.

- 9 Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the Istanbul campaign activities were held virtually through social media platforms except the vote casting itself. I was able as a member of the union to observe closely the campaigns of the candidates and their interactions with students as they were using Facebook and WhatsApp groups mainly for their campaign. Semi-structured interviews were elicited as the main methodological tool, as this format allows the maintenance of the research guideline and the interview structure along with offering leeway to probe the interviewees in order to get more data. Semi-structured interviews allow the examination of the patterns in the participants' speech, while it supplies the researcher with information that he might not have considered in the first place. The interviews were recorded through Zoom meeting rooms with prior consent of the respondents.
- 10 Twelve participants were selected among YÖDT-Istanbul members who voted in the election. They were selected purposively according to a certain criterion which guarantee the variety of the sample in terms of gender, academic level, political orientations, and whether they voted for the winning or losing contenders. They were divided into two sections, with four of them interviewed separately, and the rest interviewed in a focus group as follows:

The interviews

N	Code	Gender	Academic level	Notes
1	A2	Female	Undergraduate	Losing candidate
2	B2	Female	Master	Previous elections preparatory committee member
3	F2	Female	Undergraduate	Winning candidate
4	H1	Male	Master	Previous elections preparatory committee member

Focus group

N	Code	Gender	Academic level	Notes
1	He1	Male	Undergraduate	Previous leading member
2	Am1	Male	Undergraduate	Active member
3	Wa1	Male	Undergraduate	Elections preparatory committee member
4	Ab1	Male	Undergraduate	Previous leading member
5	Gu1	Male	Master	Previous leading member
6	Af2	Female	Undergraduate	Previous leading member
7	Su2	Female	Undergraduate	Previous leading member
8	Ru2	Female	Undergraduate	Elections preparatory committee member

Interview questions

- 11 The main research question was formulated as follows: *In your opinion, what are the factors that drive YÖDT members to choose one candidate over another?* The interview also contained some other relevant questions that enriched the content of the interviews.
1. In your opinion, why do YÖDT members participate in the YÖDT elections? And why not?
 2. How do you evaluate the efficacy of a candidate?
 3. To what extent does political affiliation and partisanship affect students' choice?
 4. Does the electoral program of a candidate affect students' choice? How?
 5. What reasons do you think allowed a female to win the election 2020 for the first time in YÖDT-Istanbul?
 6. How do you gain confidence in a candidate so that you vote for him/her?

Why do Yemeni students participate or refrain from participating in the elections?

- 12 In answering this question, the majority of the respondents attributed the participation in the student elections to personal relationships and acquaintances. In other words, the personal relationships of the candidates or their supporters lead students to come to the venue of the election and vote as a gesture of solidarity. One of the interlocutors in the focus group added that most of those students have no understanding of democratic practices. Furthermore, F2 noticed that in the last election, students go to elections to settle scores which is a reflection of the polarisation between students, as well as between groups. Moreover, almost half of the participants attributed the participation in elections to the thirst and craving for democratic practice since most of YÖDT members are youths who have not been able to participate in any political democratic practice in their country. Regarding the reason why students may refrain from participating in the elections, three of the respondents said that some students are convinced of their inability and their lack of influence on the election results. One of the interviewees pointed out that those who did not vote in the elections either have no trust in the association itself or are not interested in such activities. On the other hand, H1 attributed the problem to the location of the election venue and the “tiring nature” of Istanbul regarding its transportation.¹

The influential factors on voter's decision in YÖDT – Istanbul elections

Student Blocs and Cliques

- 13 As for the most influential blocs and cliques in YÖDT, respondents mention the following:
- Political blocs: Islah's bloc (Islamists), Al-Aqiyal's bloc (Nationalists), and Anti-Islah's bloc.
 - Region-based blocs and cliques: the People of Amran and the Hamdan clique, the Hadrami clique, and the Southerners' bloc.
 - Common interest-based blocs: the Success House of Yemen, and the Busula Reading Club.

- 14 All the interviewees emphasised the significant role that student blocs and cliques play in affecting the voter's decisions in elections. However, these blocs and cliques have different backgrounds and reasons behind their formation, some of which are explicit, and others are not. Primarily, political blocs are the most salient among student blocs, with the Yemeni Congregation for Reform or Islah being the predominant bloc. Other blocs and cliques are region-based, while others are cultural, or based on mutual interests like sports or media. The interviewees' general consensus is that blocs play a significant role, but they consider that they have a varied effect or influence. While some see student blocs as the main and most salient factor, others regard them as having a secondary role. The interviewees also have various positions regarding the acceptance or rejection of the role of these blocs in democratic practices. Most respondents find that blocs and clusters in elections are constitutive of democratic practices, but according to them, they must be mobilised in a proper way to be more efficient. Some respondents, however, showed resentment towards student blocs and cliques, seeing them as a threat to democratic practices since they deprive some good candidates from winning simply because the latter lack a supportive bloc. More than half of the interviewees asserted that these blocs and cliques usually tend to have lists of the desired candidates which they circulate among their members. According to *He1*, those lists are the most influential factor in determining the winner in the election. *Gu1* believes that had he not had the support of the Busula Reading Club, he would not have won in the previous election. On the other hand, *Wa1* claims that although Islah is the engine of the elections and the largest bloc, members of Islah who ran in the previous and current elections did not win. Similarly, another interviewee said that these blocs can have positive or negative effects on the candidate as they increase the competition among candidates. Relatedly, *Ab1* pointed out that the higher chances of a candidate to win are to be included in different lists of different blocs and clusters.

Personal relationships and connections

- 15 There is a consensus among the participants on the importance of the influence of personal relationships on voters' decisions. As seen above, participants differ in rating its level of influence. Two of the interviewees state that personal relationships are the most influential on the voters' decision. However, it is worth mentioning that some of these personal relationships or friendships are integrated within certain blocs especially small-sized ones, therefore, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the first and second factor. According to what participants mentioned regarding this point, personal relationships affect voting in two ways. The first one is the existence of a direct relationship between candidates and voters in which voters would tend to vote for their friends or acquaintances as a gesture of solidarity. The second takes the form of recommendations received by voters from their friends regarding one candidate or another. When asked about voting for a friend who is a candidate, regardless of his/her efficiency, four respondents rate efficiency higher than friendship when it comes to elections and the future of YÖDT. One of them says she would never be in such a position because she would have advised her friend not to run in the election if he/she were not competent. However, two interviewees mention that personal relationships played an important role in their decisions. One of them reaffirms it is preferable to choose a person you are familiar with over a stranger.

The election campaign and the electoral program

- 16 The participants' opinions differ on the influence of the election campaign and program; however, it seems that all agree that its impact is moderate compared to the previous factors. *Ru2* believes that election campaigns have no effect on elections in contrast to personal relationships. Moreover, six interviewees state that election campaigns have a marginal effect on elections especially on undecided voters, or those unaffiliated to student blocs. Furthermore, *H1* argues that the election campaign can have a huge impact when the candidate him/herself has a prominent presence and is known for his/her work experience. *B2* finds the electoral program important, however, she notices that students usually do not read candidates' electoral programs. *F2* elaborates more on this by observing that most students do not read the electoral program or the candidates' resume, which still retains their importance as proof of a candidate's competence and commitment. *A2*, on the other hand, argues that the reason for not reading the electoral program is that winning candidates usually do not keep their promises.

Candidates' speeches

- 17 In every election, candidates have the opportunity to give a two-minute speech before the voting in the election venue, but due to Covid-19 restrictions, these speeches were broadcast through Facebook. For some participants, the candidates' speeches were important in making their choice. However, many of them believe most students were not influenced by these speeches. *F2* is of the opinion that candidates should deliver more emotional speeches to attract voters' attention. For *He1*, candidates' speeches in this election were not as influential as the previous election since they were online. The view count on Facebook Live tends to prove *He1* right as they did not exceed 50 views for each speech, for a voter turnout of around 250. The speeches lacked the trademark energy of previous elections, but those who used emotional speeches won the election.

Gender bias

- 18 When participants were asked to what extent they think gender affected voter decision, their answers varied. *A2* for example asserts that gender was influential and that it betrays a sexist attitude among certain students. She shared her experience during the October 2020 election where some students told her that had she not been a woman, they would have voted for her. Another interviewee says that the gender factor can be present but was not so influential. On the other hand, three interviewees minimise the role of gender in affecting voting behaviour, with one stating that were there gender bias, a woman would never have won.

Regional affiliation

- 19 Regarding regional affiliation, participants hold different views. One respondent remarks that regional affiliation strongly affects voters' decision, which in turn motivates the formation of blocs and coalitions. *Af2* believes regional affiliation has an influence although not as much as blocs and cliques, while two participants believe regional affiliation has no effect whatsoever on voters' decisions.

Desire for change

- 20 Interestingly, participants who supported the winning candidate cite desire for change as an influential factor in the last election, unlike those who did not vote for her.

What is efficiency for you?

- 21 When asked to evaluate candidates' efficiency to vote for him/her, most respondents underline candidates' previous experiences. *H1* for example thinks efficiency is reflected in the way a candidate introduces him/herself to the audience and how he/she presents his/her activities in YÖDT. *B2* mentions a candidate's educational and cultural level, as well as speech and leadership skills as his/her most important assets. However, *Af2* mentions a shift in her attitude by explaining that in previous elections she used to think a candidate's competence was reflected in his/her personal relationships, leadership skills, and proficiency in the Turkish language. However, in the last election she deemed a candidate competent if he/she could achieve the goals he/she has set for him/herself. As for *Su2*, she describes a capable candidate as a person with a rich experience in volunteer work, who has great faith in YÖDT, and possesses administrative and leadership skills. Similarly, *F2* believes an efficient candidate is a capable individual with a passion for work.

What raises your trust in a candidate?

- 22 Most participants mention that previous experiences increased their trust in a candidate. Three interviewees state that a candidate's charismatic character is a crucial factor for them. *Su2* adds she finds it important that a candidate shows the ability to bring together students from different backgrounds and interests around him/her. As for *Am1*, a candidate's independence is the most important. On the other hand, *H1* tends to trust those who seem to have time to invest in YÖDT's activities, and he trusts candidates in higher academic levels when it came to the presidency of the YÖDT.

Why did Fatema win this election?

- 23 Fatema is a member of YÖDT-Istanbul who was running in the last election in 2020. She is the first female to win an election in the history of YÖDT-Istanbul. Most participants tend to believe that Fatema's win benefited from a conflict among contenders. Another reason most participants agree on is that Fatema was accepted by all students' blocs. *Wa1* argues that he does not see her winning confirms students' increased awareness regarding gender discrimination since he noticed that after the elections, the criticism, mockery and ridicule about the fact that a woman was elected as head of YÖDT-Istanbul, demonstrates a limited awareness. In fact, it was perceived that Fatema ran at a juncture when conditions were ripe for her to emerge as the best choice, which was unanimously agreed upon by all parties, and this increased her chance of winning. *Af2* summarised the reasons behind Fatema's win in four points: she deserved to win, conflictual relationships between some of the candidates, new generation openness towards the election of a woman contrary to the older generation who opposed it, and lastly, the influence of her speech. *Ab1* shares this opinion but emphasises the support

given by blocs, since Fatema was included in the list of the Islah, Busula Reading Club and the Success House of Yemen. Moreover, Ru2 adds that Fatema is compatible with all the influential blocs in the Union, has no enmities, and that her political and intellectual positions were undeclared. As for B2, she does not see the influence of gender discrimination awareness among students in her election but thinks that blocs played a big role in supporting the candidates. She points out that Aicha, another female candidate, lost the election despite her competence and active participation in YÖDT activities. It is interesting to note that no respondent mentions Fatema's electoral program or her election campaign.

Conclusion

- 24 It is surprising that no participant mentioned Covid-19 as an additional factor. I may interpret this as the lockdown was lifted at the time the election was held. Moreover, political affiliation influence was obvious in the way participants answered the questions during the focus group session. Observations of the study cannot be generalised due to the lack of representativity of the group of interviewees and because of the limited time devoted to participant observation. The researcher's position and subjectivity should be taken into consideration as it may affect the study as well as the lack of references on the topic of electoral behaviour in overseas student unions.

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NOTES

1. A suggestion will be to have several election venues in order to increase the participation percentage.

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