



POLICIES OF THE NEW TUNISIAN DICTATORSHIP

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Annotation

Since Kais Saied took power in 2021, Tunisian democracy has undergone a gradual disintegration. The Tunisian president has achieved a complete dictatorship through a slow attack on democratic institutions, by silencing the political opposition and the press, and dismantling democratic institutions such as the Constitutional Court.

The president is strengthening his position by taking steps such as dissolving parliament, ruling by presidential decree, and even persecuting non-Arab and non-Muslim minorities.ⁱ

Introduction

Tunisia, which was a model of democratic order for all Arab countries, has been a dictatorship under the leadership of Kais Saied since 2019. The law professor Saied went from being an outsider in the presidential election who was not interested in power to a dictator.

As a constitutional lawyer, Kais Saied cleverly used the existing constitution to legitimize his actions and weaken his opponents, including democratic institutions, eventually allowing him to rewrite it in his favor.

A weak parliament, consisting of many small parties, the fatigue of Tunisian citizens, and an economic crisis that had reached famine levels in some places, also played into Saied's hands. Other foreign actors also participate in Saied's retention of power, such as Egypt, whose president, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, perceived the spread of democracy to his country as a threat.^{ii,iii}

Seizure of power and constitutional amendments

In 2011, following the transition to democracy, it took considerable time to achieve consolidation. This process was finalized with the adoption of a democratic constitution in 2014. The new constitution favored small parties over large ones, influenced by past regimes where dominant parties ruled alone without coalitions. During the democratic era, small parties formed an atomized system that was unable to address Tunisia's struggling economy, relying mainly on borrowing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).^{iv}

This has convinced the Tunisian people of the incompetence of democracy in their country, and because of this, Saied still enjoys the support of a part of the population that was disgusted with the democratic system. Democratic political parties lost confidence completely, and the figure of the leader began to be popular in the country.^v

The current president did not campaign at all at first, and there was no indication that he could be the leader. He, a well-known law professor, was present at the birth of the constitution and rose to fame in 2011-2014 during the drafting of the new constitution, when he was frequently invited on television to clarify legal issues on specific topics.

He was open about his views during the election, which covered only a few points, as Al Jazeera reported: "Homosexuality is alien to Tunisian society, the death penalty should be retained, and men and women cannot inherit equally." With this openness, he connected more with voters on a personal level, unlike the controversial populist media mogul Nabil Karoui.

¹ Richard Klauber is an intern at PCMR.



It is also interesting that Saied was elected by university students and educated people, which is not usual for dictators.^{vi}

The mobilization of voters between the first and second rounds of the presidential election was exceptional in countries such as Tunisia, with its unusual increase in turnout (from 49 % to 57 %). The negative campaign against Nabil Karoui strengthened Saied's core voters, which have remained about the same size to this day.^{vii}

Saied's slow progress in achieving power is also unusual for a dictator's behaviour. The newly elected president waited for the right moment to gradually begin to take power. That moment came in mid-2021, when a crisis broke out a crisis due to COVID-19. Tunisia could not benefit from tourism, which accounted for a large part of Tunisia's GDP revenues.

On 25 July 2021, Saied declared a state of emergency and dismissed the prime minister and his government. The next day, he justified this with Article 80 of the Constitution, which states that in the event of a threat to the security of the state, the president may "take all measures necessary in exceptional circumstances, after consulting the head of government" (and the speaker of parliament). He then installed his government himself.^{viii}

Later, he suspended and vacated parliament indefinitely. On 30 March 2022, the parliament was officially dissolved, and the justification for this move was "preserving the state and its institutions." After that, some members of parliament began to be questioned by the police.

Another step was to weaken the judiciary, issuing a decree dissolving the Supreme Judicial Council on February 6 and appointing a new one a week later, with members chosen by the president. Saied also granted himself the power to remove judges from office, which he later did with 57 of them.

The new dictator also replaced 18 governors out of 24 as of July 25, 2021, and dissolved the Ministry of Local

Affairs, transferring control over municipal councils to the Ministry of the Interior. Saied issued a presidential decree granting himself the authority to appoint members of the Supreme Independent Elections Commission (ISIE). He also utilized the state media agency HAICA to silence media outlets that spoke out against his actions. In August 2021, the Supervisory Authority overseeing corruption in the public and private sectors (INLUCC) was closed by the police.^{ix}

Later, Saied called a referendum on a new constitution, in which around 30 % of the Tunisian population participated. 94 % of voters voted in favour of introducing a new constitution. With the publication of this constitution, the country joined the Third Republic.

The political system has evolved into a presidential system, characterized by a strong position of the president, who holds executive power directly and practically selects constitutional judges, and is not accountable to parliament. According to this constitution, Saied can remain in the presidency until 2034.

The president also introduced a change to the constitution, introducing a two-round single-constituency mode at the smallest administrative scale, which makes it impossible for the current parties, composed of local leaders, to implement themselves. Article 5 of the constitution establishes the central role of Islam in the country.^x

The Fragmented Political Opposition

The Tunisian opposition is fragmented and unable to find a unified approach against the dictator. Saied, meanwhile, is arresting dissidents without any serious defiance.

The Tunisian opposition has three branches. The first is the Ennahda party, along with figures from the former ruling party, Nidaa Tounes, and the original opponents of Saied's constitutional changes, who call



themselves "Citizens against the coup movement". Together, they form the National Salvation Front.

The second group consists of four social democratic parties led by the Democratic Current. Among them is the Ettakatol party, which was the ruling party from 2011 to 2013.

The third part is Abir Moussi's Free Dostourian Party (PDL), a party that supports Ben Ali and is known for its revolution-negationist stance. This party lacked coalition potential even before President Saied came to power.^{xi}

A test for the Tunisian opposition

After the constitutional referendum, the opposition perceived the low turnout as a victory, as it announced a boycott of the referendum. However, the reality was somewhat different. This referendum had the second-lowest turnout of all referendums ever held in the region. According to the SIGMA survey, this was not the opposition's fault.

Moreover, only 21 % of all voters boycotted the referendum, which is still less than the number of supporters of President Saied. The rest of the voters are tired of politics and have abstained from voting.

The position of the political opposition has been further weakened by the negative reactions of the US and the EU (otherwise, the Tunisian opposition remains isolated internationally).^{xii}

Apart from some members of the National Salvation Front, the opposition to Saied's coup has been almost silent. Following the suspension of the Tunisian parliament's powers, the PDL party even promoted this move as a victory against Ennahda and political Islam. Members of this party played a significant role in the dissolution of the parliament.

The two remaining branches distance themselves from the National Salvation Front and refuse to form a unified grouping with it. Many Tunisians blame the former ruling parties for the socio-economic crisis and

the politicking that allowed the dictator to seize power.

Therefore, Saied is not open to dialogue with any opposition party, since the newly formed parliament consists mostly of independent candidates, and the opposition has no representation there. The dictator can now blame his failures on the parliament. The unpopularity of his parliament will not harm him, as voter turnout during the last parliamentary elections was only 11 %.^{xiii}

Crackdowns on dissent

Ahead of the crucial 2024 presidential election, 97 dissidents and human rights activists were arrested. Only three candidates, including Saied, were allowed to run by the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE). The three dissidents, Imed Daimi, Mondher Znaidi, and Abdellatif Al Mekki, won their appeals in an administrative court, which ruled that they should be reinstated. However, the ISIE rejected the administrative court's decision and refused to implement it.

Dissidents who had the will to run were prosecuted and harassed by the courts. ISIE also sent warning letters to media outlets that spoke out against the dictatorship, and independent journalist Khaoula Boukri had her accreditation revoked.

Authorities have been carrying out arrests of the opposition and media critics since 2022.^{xiv}

In April 2025, another wave of arrests took place. More than 40 dissidents, diplomats, and journalists were arrested. They face charges including "plotting against the state" and "belonging to a terrorist group". The UN and Human Rights Watch have condemned the use of judicial power against dissent and called for an "end to all forms of persecution of opponents and activists".

Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, a former leader of Ennahdha, is now on hunger strike, and eight others are being tried in their absence, as they were deemed too dangerous

to attend the trial in person. Five other defendants have also begun hunger strikes alongside Mbarek.

Among those already convicted is the French intellectual Bernard-Henri Levy.

Other targets of the Saied regime include former Speaker of Parliament Rached Ghannouchi, former Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, former Justice Minister Nouredine Bhiri, and Said Ferjani, a member of the party's political executive committee.^{xv}

During the wave of trials in July 2025, Rached Ghannouchi, the current leader of Ennahdha, was also sentenced to 14 years in prison for "secret security apparatus." However, Die Welt, unlike Al Jazeera, reports that this dissident intentionally did not participate in the trial to express his disagreement with the Tunisian judiciary, which he views as politically manipulated. Including his previous sentences, his total prison time reaches 27 years.



(Rached Ghannouchi, opposition leader)

However, 11 of those convicted managed to leave the country. Among them were prominent politicians from the democratic era, such as former Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed and former Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalem.^{xvii}

The mediator between power and people

The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) is also an essential part of Tunisian politics. The UGTT played a significant role in several key political events, including the overthrow of the French government in the country, and contributed to the onset of the Arab Spring.

The UGTT has tried to facilitate dialogue between the parties and the president, as it has previously mediated between the government and the opposition. President Saied is attempting to force the UGTT to relinquish its role as a political mediator and focus solely on representing the interests of its 800,000 members in a country of 12 million.

UGTT members are also being prosecuted, but the regime has not concentrated fully on them. The UGTT's popularity has declined, and the country's people see it as outdated, so the UGTT can only handle a few small protests. Due to internal issues and a gradual loss of support, the unions are avoiding confrontation with the president.^{xviii}

Saied's Anti-immigrant campaign

There are over 10,000 sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, 70 % of whom live in very poor humanitarian and sanitary conditions and without access to basic services. Young Tunisians face high unemployment, which prolongs the crisis in Tunisia. Their poor conditions lead to radicalization of the local population and violence against migrants, who are perceived by young Tunisians as competition in the labor market.

The crossing from Tunisia to Europe is therefore becoming extremely dangerous. In 2023, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded more than 500 deaths of Tunisian and sub-Saharan migrants in the Mediterranean.^{xix}

In Tunisia and Libya, there is organized violence against migrants, torture, beatings, and racist attacks are common in these countries. The European Union



has signed a memorandum with Tunisia on returns and "return hubs", the aim of which is to make forced returns of migrants back to countries outside the EU. For this reason, EU representatives and non-profit organizations are even more concerned about the situation in Tunisia and Libya.

Tunisian security forces are also involved in the violence against migrants, having recently raided and dismantled makeshift camps in the areas of Sfax, El Amra, and Jebeniana, where hundreds of migrants were living, mainly from Sudan, Mali, Gambia, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast, among other Sub-Saharan African countries.^{xx}

Tunisian security forces are also holding naval exercises to intercept migrants off Tunisian shores, during which 265 migrants have died trying to cross the Mediterranean, according to a report by UN experts. The report also mentions 95 missing migrants, some of whom were "victims of enforced disappearance or acts amounting to enforced disappearance."^{xxi}

Migrants are reportedly immediately transferred to an area near the Algerian and Libyan borders when they enter Tunisia via land border crossings and are shot by Tunisian border guards if they attempt to cross back from Tunisia.

Tunisian authorities have repeatedly denied these allegations, but President Saïed has also repeatedly made racist statements towards migrants. According to the testimonies of some refugees, as reported by Die Welt, police have repeatedly confiscated mobile phones, food, and other personal belongings from migrants in the camps. In some cases, groups of local thieves have broken into the camps.^{xxii}

In Tunisia, there are also voices against humanitarian workers who help refugees. In May 2024, the project director and head of the Tunisian Refugee Council (TRC) were arrested after a meeting of interior ministers from North African countries and Italy. Abderrazek Krimi and Mustafa

Djemali were questioned by the criminal brigade police on suspicion of illegally hiding people in the country and receiving funding from abroad.^{xxiii}

Saïed's regime has also arrested low-ranking individuals, including at least two independent journalists. The court fined the two detained journalists 50,000 dinars (\$16,000). Even the lawyers of the persecuted media outlets will not escape questioning.^{xxiv}

Tunisian authorities have arrested, summoned, and interrogated executives, former employees, or members of at least 12 organizations. Apartment owners who rented out their apartments to migrants are also being arrested.

There is a hate campaign on social media against refugees and UN workers, supported by President Saïed. Tunisian police have also detained human rights defender Saadia Mosbah, head of the Tunisian anti-racism organization Mnemty, which supports refugees and migrants. Additionally, they have arrested two other employees of Mnemty, and they have all been questioned about the organization's partners and funding.^{xxv}

Foreign relations with Saïed's regime

US – Tunisia relations

After Kais Saïed invoked Article 80 and dissolved parliament, the Biden administration sent a delegation to politely request that the president appoint a prime minister and reconvene parliament. Saïed politely dismissed it, saying, "There is no cause for concern about the values of freedom, justice, and democracy that Tunisia shares with American society."^{xxvi}

Under the Trump administration, 25 % tariffs were imposed on Tunisia in August 2025, which were justified as "long-term and very persistent". This is not a significant blow to the Tunisian economy, but the tariffs are an obstacle to bilateral relations.



During a visit by US special advisor for the Middle East and Africa, Massad Boulos, and deputy assistant secretary for North Africa, Josh Harris, President Saied said that Tunisia should diversify its relations for the sake of its people, suggesting closer cooperation with China and Russia. However, the reason was not necessarily the tariffs, but Saied's pro-Palestinian stance, which brought Tunisia closer to Iran.^{xxvii}

Tunisia and the Middle Eastern Powers

For Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Kais Saied's actions are a relief. Since these countries feared the spread of the Arab Spring to them. Democracy, however, was not the biggest threat to these countries in Tunisia. It was the Ennahda party, which the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt saw as something more than a bastion of the Muslim Brotherhood, as an ally of jihadist forces throughout the Maghreb. Between 2015 and 2018, these countries vilified Ennahda leader Ghannouchi in various ways.

When General Haftar launched a campaign against the rival Turkish-backed Libyan government during the Libyan civil war, Ghannouchi flew to Ankara, which Saied saw as interference in foreign affairs. A move that would have won the favor of the Emiratis and Saudis.^{xxviii}

In 2021, Kais Saied visited Egypt, where he met with President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. They expressed a common position on Libya and the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile.

Saied's support in Tunisia depends on defining an effective political and economic plan. If the protests against Saied intensify, Qatar and Turkey are likely to support it to balance their regional rivals – the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.^{xxix}

Tunisia has recently been moving closer to Iran, which is now trying to extend its influence deeper into the African continent. This is evidenced by the fact that President Saied was one of three foreign representatives who attended the funeral of Iranian

President Ebrahim Raisi. Additionally, Tunisia has lifted visa requirements for Iran, which could enable Iranian intelligence services to operate.

Tunisian society, however, disagrees with President Saied on the issue of rapprochement with Iran, as Tunisians are rather secular to the point that they separate faith from politics, which the theocratic regime in Iran does not do. The branches of Islam are also different, with the Sufi moderate branch and the Ismaili branch having completely different views on the matter. The latest complication regarding Iran is the close ties with the US and Italy, which Tunisia cannot afford to break in the current situation.

Another ally is Algeria, which has provided Tunisia with several loans and central bank deposits, as well as favorable electricity and gas agreements that have helped to strengthen mutual relations.^{xxx}

Tunisia-EU relations

The European Union has had relations with Tunisia since the 1990s, when dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali ruled, and has experience with authoritarian regimes. The EU provides Tunisia with large sums of money and works closely with the country. Tunisia has helped to mitigate migration to Europe and has opposed human smuggling and the inhumane treatment of migrants.

The turning point between Saied and the EU came in 2021, when he suspended parliament, and in 2022, when he began dissolving institutions and promulgating a new constitution. At the time, the EU called for "institutional stability" and similar statements, but apart from these statements, the EU did not interfere in Tunisian politics.^{xxxi}

Tunisia has always been important to the EU in the area of migration, but in the current situation, Tunisia needs the EU more than ever. As a result, a new key Memorandum of Understanding was signed in July 2023, in which the EU pledged €1.1 billion to Tunisia in five areas of cooperation: macroeconomic stability, economy and trade, green energy transition, people-

to-people contacts, migration and mobility. The EU did not demand a democratic system.

The EU only started to escalate its rhetoric after the 2024 presidential elections, which were preceded by mass arrests of opposition figures, including the leading figure, Rached Ghannouchi. It also expressed concern and demanded an explanation for the actions of the Tunisian authorities. Saied reacted sharply to the EU's criticism, condemning interference in Tunisia's domestic affairs and even returning 60 million euros to the European Commission, saying that Tunisia "seeks cooperation and not charity." However, he was immediately given 150 million euros to stabilize the Tunisian state budget.^{xxxii}



^{xxxiii} From left to right: Mark Rutte, Ursula von der Leyen, Kais Saied, and Georgia Meloni.

Conclusion

Tunisia's current dictator, Kais Saied, exemplifies the failure of the Arab Spring. It also shows how an unnoticed candidate can exploit a crisis and discontent to undermine democracy.

Although Saied's government relies on people avoiding voting in polls and referendums, it remains relatively stable. This stability is due to fragmented opposition and weak unions that do not oppose Saied.

Saied is comfortable with the fact that the EU and the U.S. do not want to criticize his dictatorship. The U.S. ignores Saied because it has no strategic interests in Tunisia. The EU, on the other hand, has an interest in stopping migration here.

As far as regional powers are concerned, we can observe a clash between traditional rivals in the Middle East. Turkey and Qatar support Saied's opposition, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia do not want the spread of democracy among Arab states.

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