



## Is Tunisia transforming from a democratization case study to an autocracy?

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*Tunisia is usually being referred to as one of the most successful cases with regards to social justice and democratization after the Arab Spring uprisings. However, ten years later, the country is once more facing a political and socioeconomic crisis, with President Saied's policies becoming more and more unpopular amongst the people. Amidst the recent wave of popular upheaval in Tunisia, this article aims to analyze current domestic affairs and examine whether authoritarianism is on the rise.*

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Ten years after the Arab Spring uprisings and the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, several initiatives were promoted, offering great prospects for the country's democratic trajectory. The latter is what is currently at stake, with a popular movement against current President Kais Saied being more and more inflamed by his decisions and policies. During the past decade, a new constitution was drafted with clauses protecting freedom of press, promoting women's rights and tackling corruption, among others. Moreover, Tunisia had been showing notable progress when it comes to the establishment of a more effective party system and the democratic refinement of the administrative, executive and judiciary branches, where a great majority of seats were filled by new faces that participated in the 2011 uprisings.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, a great number of members of the elite associated with the ousted corrupt and unpopular former Ben Ali regime were excluded from holding power. However, as their exclusion was set to last up to ten years, many members of civil society worry that the return of former political figures may lead the country back to times of turmoil and instability.

Despite the fact that Tunisia remains a great example of popular demand leading to change, it still is far from being a fair, just and all-around democracy, with many believing that it is currently taking the exact opposite route. According to the World Bank, the unemployment rate in the country has reached almost 17%, showcasing a steady increase, while the poverty rate almost reached a peak of 19% during the outburst of the Covid-19 crisis back in 2020, according to Statista. The annual GDP per capita, according to the World Bank, is approximately around 3.500 USD and decreasing, while inflation is rampant. The pandemic also left the country's health system with an important burn out that is still quite prominent. Currently, the country is negotiating with the IMF in order to be granted a billion-dollar loan for the reactivation of the economy. Meanwhile, a number of young Tunisians, usually males from the more impoverished areas, are fleeing the country, aspiring to migrate to Europe for better quality of life, crossing the Mediterranean Sea and endangering their safety. On March 20th, a shipwreck of Tunisian migrants trying to reach the Italian coastline left twenty dead at sea. Others are seeking more radical routes, leading them to participate in various regional terrorist cells. Insecurity and instability have also been increasing in Tunisia due to a rise in Islamist terrorist activity, mostly by Islamic State actors, such as the deadly mass shooting at a Sousse tourist resort back in 2015.<sup>2</sup>

Just as ten years ago, the people of Tunisia have been taking to the streets again, expressing their dissatisfaction with the health and economic management of the Covid-19 crisis. The 2021-2022 uprisings in Tunisia led President Saied to the suspension of the government, the freezing of Parliament and the dismissal of former Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi in the summer of 2021. He then appointed Nadja Boulén as new Prime Minister, a female technocrat who previously worked at the World Bank and, most importantly, lacked parliamentary approval for her appointment to office. Even though there have been demonstrations in favor of Saied, the majority of society stood against his decision for the suspension of government and referred to his self-granting of executive authority to legislate by decree as an internally inflicted coup.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this caused an internal crisis within the Ennahda party, leading many members to resign, in part due to the party's lack of ability to shape a common front against the President's arbitrary actions.<sup>4</sup>

During the past six months, socioeconomic stagnation and popular upheaval against Saied's rise of authoritarian rule and monopolistic power have been central aspects in Tunisian domestic debate. Thousands of demonstrators forming a very strong grassroots movement, largely supported by the Ennahda party and with a citizens initiative called "Citizens Against the Coup" being on the lead, are protesting for the protection of the legacy of the Jasmine Revolution, defying a series of measures against political gatherings.<sup>5</sup> For instance, at the ten-year anniversary of the ousting of Ben Ali in early January, Saied imposed measures forbidding public demonstrations, using the pandemic as pretext.<sup>6</sup> During the demonstrations, police brutality has been extremely high, with water cannons, tear gas and physical violence threatening the safety of the demonstrators. Unjustified arrests of protesters have also been increasing.<sup>7</sup> On the 14th of January a protester, Rhida Bouziane, was killed by the police. This growing state violence is also being justified by a securitization narrative according to which the

demonstrations have been infiltrated by terrorists, or even that a great number of the arrestees are themselves members of al-Qaeda or Islamic State affiliated cells.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the broadening of who can be colored as terrorist and what can be considered an attack is the means that renders structural political matters into security threats for the state. That way, in the eyes of the general public state violence is normalized as it is considered necessary to counter terrorism, while at the same time the social and political demands of the protesters are sidelined. This growing discourse in Tunisia is similar to Sisi's counterterrorism policies in Egypt, leading many to observe a general securitization trend in the broader region.

The past two months have been crucial when it comes to the further concentration of power by Saied and the rising authoritarianism in the country. More specifically, in early February, the growingly unfavored President dissolved the High Judicial Council of Tunisia, accusing them of hampering the progress of certain political investigations - mostly of the Ennahda Party - and of accepting bribes.<sup>9</sup> In its place, Saied appointed a Temporary Judicial Council, where 9 out of the 21 members are chosen by the President himself. Additionally, the President has the right to dismiss any judge that fails to serve his position properly, while all judges are forbidden to form collective action or strike because, according to Saied, that would disturb the orderly workings of the judiciary system. The critique against these presidential amendments is that they are placing the country's national judiciary system and its independence at stake, leading to a less free state with an imminent maximization of authoritarian rule. It should be noted that despite the existing measures against demonstrations, Saied called for his supporters to gather against the High Judicial Council, as he announced its dissolution.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, house arrests, military courts and extra-judicial detentions, such as the one related to former Justice Minister Nouredine Bhiri of the Ennahda party, are becoming commonplace in the country, with many citizens, party members and human rights organizations viewing Saied's methods to be paving the way towards autocracy.<sup>11</sup> However, it should be mentioned that many arrests are fraud related, strengthening the President's initiative to tackle corruption. Another priority is the arrest of those who are responsible for political scandals in the country, such as the assassination of left-wing politician Chokri Belaid in 2013. Former Judge Akremi was arrested with the accusation of hiding important information concerning the resolving of the Belaid case.<sup>12</sup> One would think that Saied's policies against corruption and secret killings would be a step towards a more democratic state mechanism, but the previously aforementioned context of power monopoly and state violence would advocate against such claims.

In conclusion, Tunisia is a great example for understanding both the importance of popular struggle but also that democracy is not a one-time goal, but a constant process. It can be lost if not safeguarded by the people themselves and those in power. As the protesters chant, "the Revolution in Tunisia continues", with hopes that the claims for a rise of authoritarian rule to be proved false.

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