
Tunisia: the dismantling of a democracy

Youssef Cherif | Tunis-based political analyst, Director of Columbia Global Centers, Tunis, and PhD researcher at Leiden University

Theme

A year after President Kais Saied's power grab, Tunisia is now led by an individual who is institutionalising a system where he can rule alone with no opposition.

Summary

The oft-praised democratic transition of Tunisia has many aspects to it and the fact that it has not delivered economically has led it to be questioned among a majority of Tunisians. Therefore, when a populist President like Kais Saied promised to change the system and rid the country of its political class, it worked. The President, unknown to the general public just a few years ago, and rarely active in Tunisian politics during the dictatorship, embodied the anger of a depressed nation and channelled it to start a new chapter. He staged a power grab in July 2021 and launched a reform intended to give the country a new constitution and a revised political system. The constitution's main attributions are recentralising power, replacing the parliamentary system with a presidential one, and limiting the influence of political opposition. In short, it is about dismantling the legacy of the Arab Spring and remaking the system that prevailed before 2011. Unsurprisingly, Saied secured the support of the deep state and went ahead with a referendum on his constitution on 25 July 2022. However, the process was opaque and voter turnout was low. Opposition to Saied's policies is growing, both internally and externally, and Tunisia's economic difficulties continue to deepen, in part because of global dynamics. Rather than a recipe for stability, the referendum may open a new cycle of contestation, because Saied is now the only person to blame for the country's state of affairs.

Analysis

How it started: the gradual march towards authoritarianism

On 25 July 2021 Tunisians flooded the streets in protest against the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and, more generally, of the affairs of a country suffering from years of economic decline. The number of demonstrators has changed, being less substantial than those who were out in 2010-11 or during the political crisis of 2013, although most observers agree that the figures were sizeable and spread throughout the country. Moreover, there were very few counterdemonstrations, mostly organised by the sympathisers of Tunisia's principal neo-Islamist party, Ennahda. Few were ready to defend the falling government of Hichem Mechichi or the loathed parliament and its majority leader, Ennahda.

In any case, the anti-government demonstrations were widely covered by local social media and Gulf TV stations. They were enough for the President to call on the military and security chiefs for an urgent national security meeting, invoking the constitution's Article 80, dealing with cases of imminent danger. Overstretching the article's interpretation, he 'froze' parliament and dismissed the Prime Minister, declaring himself the country's all-powerful leader, ruling by decree. Flanked by his Generals, he gave a heated speech in which he used strong language, including the threat of live firing, quite unusual in Tunisian political discourse.

The months that followed saw a classic authoritarian turn, with the application of travel bans on several politicians and politically-inclined individuals, the arrest of prominent figures, the shutdown of opposition media and social media outlets, and the dismantling or weakening of several organisations that opposed the President's actions. Compared with Egypt, however, the antidemocratic backsliding has been slow and largely peaceful. A year after the power grab, no political assassination has taken place, travel bans have not been consistent, only a handful of individuals remain in jail and freedom of expression is generally respected.

Nevertheless, while slow, the authoritarian turn is real. And there is a déjà-vu from Egypt. After the 3 July coup, for instance, General Abdelfattah el-Sisi and his supporters claimed that between 30 and 40 million Egyptians (around 45% of the population) had demonstrated in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi later called on the people to flood the streets and give him a mandate to act. The figure of millions was advanced once again and Sisi used it to justify the Rabaa massacre. In Tunisia, President Kais Saied encouraged his followers to demonstrate following the power grab and claimed that 1.8 million Tunisians were on the streets on 4 October (15% of the population). The figure is wildly exaggerated, as most observers counted a few thousands scattered across the country. Saied would repeat claims such as this several times. They remain unsubstantiated but, as in Egypt, they are what has stuck in the memory of many citizens. The difference with Cairo remains in the 'softness' of the government's moves and their bloodlessness.

As the months passed, Saied proved unwilling to compromise and continued to rule by decree. Tunisia is among a tiny group of states in the world that are governed without a parliament, in this case for over a year and counting. And when the 'frozen' parliament decided to convene virtually to annul the President's decision in April 2022, Zoom and Teams were censored for a couple of hours –the first act of clear political censorship since 2011–. Then, after the MPs met via another online platform and went ahead with their plans, the President decided to simply dissolve parliament. In fact, by doing so, he ignored Article 80, which he had already distorted –an article that warns specifically against dissolving parliament–.

Tunisia is now led by one man and institutionalising a system where a single individual can rule without opposition. Even during the dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, there was a ruling political party –RCD–, in which divergent opinions were debated, with two echo-chamber parliaments and a group of skilled advisers around the President. Today, a single voice alone is heard.

Democracy dismantled

Many Tunisians link their current woes to the last decade's mismanagement. Therefore, they transposed their anger not only to the ruling Ennahda party but also to parliament and, more generally, to democracy. This helps explain why Saied's actions face such a minimal opposition. Hence, when the President decided to attack the post-2011 flagship institutions such as the anti-corruption agency (INLUCC), Truth and Dignity (IVD), the Higher Council of Magistrates (ASM) and the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) few people disapproved.

Rather than reforming the ill-functioning bodies or proposing amendments to the constitution, Saied decided a reset, building his 'new republic' over a tabula rasa. By freezing these institutions or removing their leaders he broke a system that had only recently been established. These autonomous institutions lost their independence and are now filled either with individuals close to him or indisposed to criticise his decisions. Moreover, by centralising all power, Saied effectively halted the decentralisation process that started in 2011.

Willingly or unwillingly, Saied responded to the demands of Tunisia's deep state and self-proclaimed anti-Arab Spring groups. There is a popular idea among this plethora of individuals that democracy is chaotic and everything that has happened since 2011 is a foreign conspiracy against the Tunisian State. Actually, Saied often repeats these thoughts, promising to reunify the State, end foreign meddling and, in his own peculiar way, make Tunisia great again. Unsurprisingly then, the regional anti-democracy axis (the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) is praising him, guaranteeing a wide media coverage and establishing a regular exchange of envoys and phone calls.

Even after Kais Saied leaves, it will be difficult for democracy to recover, especially since the tools of authoritarianism –the armed and security forces– remain strong and under limited civilian control. The precedent applied when the power grab of 2021 took place, along with the staunch nationalist and populist discourse, as well as the authoritarian trends that are now taken for granted, are going to haunt Tunisian politics for a long time.

How it is ending: the constitutional saga

For years, Kais Saied was known by the general public as the legal expert invited on TV and radio to comment on constitutional affairs. He uses a literary Arabic jargon that only a minority understands, leading to memes and jokes about his rhetorical style. But the fact is he always talked about the constitution and constitutional affairs. When he ran for elections, he was critical of the constitution. And after he got elected he often complained about the lack of prerogatives given to him by the actual constitution.

It was therefore all the more normal for one of his first decisions after invoking Article 80 to dismiss the constitution and come up with a new one. He first started by 'freezing' the constitution's later chapters, keeping only the preamble and the pages related to civil liberties. Then he announced that an online national consultation (*al-Istishara*) would be organised for Tunisians to express their views on a new constitution (January-March 2022). Then, in May 2022, a committee to draft the 'new republic's' constitution was formed, and a select, mini 'national dialogue' began. The method's top-down approach,

however, repelled many of its invited participants and alienated them. The consultation would be followed by a referendum about the new constitution (in July 2022), itself followed by elections (probably local and legislative, but not presidential, in December 2022).

Only a few people were to be involved in the process. By comparison, the previous constitution, adopted in 2014, took two years of debates in an elected constituent assembly under the scrutiny of local and foreign media outlets as well as civil society. Saied's national consultation, an online survey that was marred by bugs from its inception, was a fiasco in terms of participation: only 520,000 Tunisians participated, less than 10% of the active population. His new constitution, whose first draft began to circulate in June 2022, took a few days of consultation and was the work of a small committee of scholars and practitioners, whose identities are barely known, and outside any media deliberations. Later on, the committee leaders themselves said that the text that Saied presented for the vote was not theirs, and they began criticising both him and his actions in public.

When the draft constitution was out, only a handful of Tunisians had any idea about its contents. On 25 July 2022 voters participated in a referendum that asked them: 'Do you accept the project of the new constitution of the Republic of Tunisia?'. Because of the opacity of the process, the short timeline and the fact that summer is not a period for reading and political engagement, the expectations are that most voters voted on something they have no idea about. In fact, many participated just to cast a ballot against Ennahda, while others did so in the hope of improving their socio-economic conditions, not for the new constitution.

Because of these reasons and because Tunisians are fed up with politics, the turnout was low (around 30%). This is the country's second constitution in a decade, eliminating the parliamentary system and replacing it with a presidential one, possibly more centralised than under Ben Ali.

The economy: systemic and unresolved hindrances

It would be wrong to blame Tunisia's woes on Kais Saied alone. The country had kept lurching from one crisis to another since the late 2000s. In fact, its recurrent political crises and massive demonstrations can be seen in terms of continuity: those who demonstrated in July 2021 against Ennahda had similar hopes and demands to those who in 2010 and 2011 revolted against the Ben Ali dictatorship: they wanted better economic opportunities and economic security along with regime change.

Every government that took over at the country's helm since the fall of Ben Ali continued to follow the dictator's economic policies and proved unable to bring innovative solutions to the nation's mounting problems. These successive governments kept seeking foreign loans from multiple partners, mostly international financial institutions, the US, the EU (especially Germany, France and Italy), Japan, and the regional players of the GCC and Turkey.

Over the years the system ran out of steam. Foreign loans were used to cover salaries and basic needs, which increased debt with no long-term vision in sight. It was money that disappeared: an unsustainable course of action. In the meantime, local and international investors avoided investing in such an unstable environment. The sclerotic bureaucratic system was unable to follow the pace of progress, imposing restrictions on entrepreneurs and other money makers. By 2021, moreover, the tourism industry was broke after years of terrorism, a devastating pandemic, and political turbulence.

What Kais Saied did, however, was to put a halt to the sympathy capital the country had enjoyed thus far, while providing no alternative. The political instability that he accelerated, which came after the negative status-quo that characterised the previous era, is a worrying outlook for foreign partners, local and international investors, and credit-rating agencies, with the latter continuing to downgrade Tunisia.

Political and social opposition

Most political groups are vocally opposed to Kais Saied's project, but their popular weight is modest. Exceptions are Ennahda with its institutionalised party and the Free Destourian Party (PDL), a remnant of Ben Ali's RCD. So far, the two parties have never worked together as they are bitter enemies. Furthermore, their capacity of mobilisation is limited. At their occasional meetings, thousands assemble, although the numbers are never consistent and the two political parties face difficulties to act and to receive funding.

Actually, Tunisia's largest opposition group is not a political party. It is the country's leading labour union, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT). The latter is an obstacle to economic reforms, reforms that are the pet peeve of Tunisia's international partners, but it is nonetheless the only counterpower to Saied. The UGTT is not willing to compromise on the interests of its members with regards to wages or public sector employment, or the privatisation of the bankrupted public companies. Over the past decade, and as political reforms were ongoing, the UGTT made sure to slow down any economic restructuring and keep the system where it was under the dictatorship. And because it is unwilling to give up its privileges as chief negotiator and kingmaker, the UGTT has become the leading opposition force to Kais Saied.

As the referendum came closer, the UGTT hardened its criticism of Saied. The Union's Secretary General issued statements warning about Saied's plans and then went on to stage a general strike in the public sector, which was widely observed, and threatened further similar action. The political parties proved unable to mobilise the masses, but the UGTT placed itself at the forefront instead.

However, there are many UGTT members supportive of Kais Saied. After all, he is opposed to Ennahda, statist in his mindset and rather conservative, leftist and pan-Arabist in his ideological inclinations, like many of the union members. Saied has support not only among the Union's grassroots but also amongst some of its leaders. Hence the UGTT's ambivalence with regards to the referendum: it did not boycott, it did not call on the people to vote 'Yes', but it did not suggest they vote 'No' either.

Foreign isolationism

During his election campaign, Saied was as enigmatic to Tunisians as he was to the international community. Some accused him of being on Turkey and Qatar's side, others on being in favour of the UAE and Egypt, while others went so far as to say he was the puppet of Algeria and even of Iran or Russia. The fact that he won the elections in such an unexplainable manner opened up a Pandora's box of conspiracy theories.

Early on in Saied's presidency, in December 2019, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Tunis hoping to drag Tunisia into his Libyan campaign. Saied was also visited by the Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who invited him to Doha. But very quickly this relationship worsened, as he and Ennahda's leader Rached Ghannouchi did not get along. Qatar, which traditionally bails the country out when the going gets difficult, refrained from helping as the economy disintegrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. And when the Turks criticised the dissolution of parliament in April 2022, the Tunisian authorities hit back angrily. The 'Turkish-Qatari puppet' myth did not hold out for long.

The Western powers were wary of Saied as he was completely unknown to them and because of all the rumours surrounding his rise. But once he was in power, they tried to engage. The difference between him and his predecessors, however, is his isolationism and lack of contact with outsiders. For Americans and Europeans, who are used to having close interlocutors within Tunisia's circles of power, the newcomer kept a sealed door. After his 2021 power grab, his isolationism deepened, as he would respond to any US or European criticism by angry speeches or through his fans' unrestrained social media platforms. Western criticism of Tunisia is now reminiscent of the pre-2011 period when the US and European governments issued regular statements criticising the regime's human-rights violations. Nevertheless, as long as Tunis is consistent on counterterrorist cooperation and in filtering informal migration, Westerners will avoid any major escalation.

In his rhetoric, Saied is very careful in courting the Algerians, framing his politics in a form of 20th century pan-Arabism that has a certain appeal in Algiers. He made a few visits to Algiers and spoke highly of the relationships between the two countries. So far, the Algerians have not been as enthusiastic as he is and their position remains cautious towards him. As Tunisia's struggles deepen, Algeria's help remained limited. For Algiers, Saied's plans are unclear, and the fact that he forged close ties with Egypt while also continuing the deep military partnership with the US and NATO looks suspicious. The Algerians do not loath him, but they continue to watch attentively.

The one side that seems satisfied with Saied's policies is the Emirati-Saudi-Egyptian axis. In 2019, during the election campaign, their media outlets accused Saied of being an 'Islamist in disguise' and there were few public communications between him and the axis following his election. Yet, as his relationships with Ennahda (and Turkey) soared, a transformation began to appear in the axis' media strategy. Then, during the height of the pandemic in the summer of 2021, they established an air bridge of vaccine supplies. In the days following his 25 July power grab, high level envoys from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain landed in Tunis. Saied himself met Egypt's Sisi several times, visited the UAE and sent his Prime Minister to Saudi Arabia. He keeps praising the growing relationship between Tunisia and its 'Arab brethren'. But even the axis has

reservations: few investments came from Saudi Arabia or the UAE, even though their loans and grants keep going to Egypt or Pakistan. They, like any investor, worry about the whereabouts of their investments. They also know that Saied will not follow them in the Abraham Accords, and that his staunch nationalism will limit their intervention.

Conclusion

After a year spent dismantling the foundations of parliamentary democracy, Kais Saied won his constitutional referendum with more than 90% of the vote. Tunisia is now, once again, run via a centralised presidential system, and it will not have a parliament before 2023. The President's powers, unchecked for the last year, will continue unchecked for at least six more months. The voter turnout, however, was less than 30%, and the problems facing Tunisia are piling up. Moreover, few of those who voted for his proposed constitution actually read it; most thought that saying 'Yes' would improve their socio-economic conditions and remove the current scapegoat, the Ennahda party, from power.

Saied and his government have high hopes on an imminent deal with the IMF to give the economy a boost. The country's Western partners waited for the referendum to announce a new start and renew their offers. Yet the expectations from the Tunisian side are different: among the general public it is the immediate improvement of their socio-economic situation and among Saied's partisans it is the transformation of Tunisia into a third-worldish socialist state. The UGTT would want to be consulted in any discussion with the IMF and is likely to refuse any austerity measures. The political opposition, marginal but vocal, will build on these contradictions and high expectations to strengthen its message.

When September comes, Tunisia will still be reeling from its political instability. It will have received only a fraction of the expected tourists this summer and it will be looking for other sources of wheat than Ukraine and Russia. Oil prices will still be high and, consequently, the prices of most commodities, along with inflation. Many citizens will still be blaming Ennahda by then, but more and more will begin to turn their eyes to the all-powerful President. How will he act if the UGTT continues to oppose him, or if substantial numbers demonstrate against his policies? In the past, the Tunisian authorities would exert controlled repression and then resort to informal negotiations before formalising deals. Then again, that was the case under a parliamentary regime checked by media and civil society organisations. This time, the response could be different.