

Undoing a Revolution: Saied's Tunisia and the EU

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Since coming to power in 2019, Kais Saied has tightened his grip on Tunisia's institutions and rolled back democratic reforms linked to the Arab Spring. His popularity feeds on resentment against sub-Saharan migrants, elites, and foreign interference. The EU, eager to curb migration and develop green energy, is turning a blind eye to his abuses.

Tunisia is a "privileged partner" of the European Union, which has supported efforts to transform the country's political system and stabilise its economy since the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. Just over a year ago, the two concluded an Association Agreement and a Memorandum of Understanding to, among other things, ensure the stability of the Tunisian economy, facilitate Tunisia's energy transition, and manage migration flows.

However, the North African country continues to grapple with severe economic and social problems. Despite the economy doing better this year than in 2023 – partly thanks to the rebound in tourism – unemployment currently stands at 16 per cent, with a disproportionate effect on women and young people, public debt is growing, and inflation is above 9 per cent. Purchasing power has declined because salaries have remained stagnant while prices have soared: the minimum wage is around 110 euros.



Kais Saied casts his vote in the working-class district of Ennasr, accompanied by his wife; he won the election with 90.96 per cent of the votes. ©Severine Sajous

These problems are amplified by a complex political situation. President Kais Saied was reelected on 6 October following a highly controversial presidential election in which voter turnout was just 28 per cent (with only 6 per cent of young people voting). The newly re-elected president has been pursuing populist and nationalistic policies, issuing decrees with little or no

involvement from advisors. This hasn't helped his image on the international stage.

"He is anti-politics," said Sami Ben Abderrahmane, a retired judge. "The people believe in him as if he were a prophet. You cannot change the electoral law a year before the elections; you cannot change the rules of the game. Economically, there will be no major reforms coming."

During his five-year tenure, Saied appointed five different prime ministers, suspended the Parliament in July 2021 after a political stalemate and economic crisis lasting several years, and finally dissolved it in March 2022. The new constitution he introduced grants the president significantly expanded powers while simultaneously weakening the influence of Tunisia's legislative (parliamentary) and judiciary branches. In addition, three months before the elections were to take place, Saied made changes to the electoral law in order to reduce the role played by political parties.

The members of the Independent High Authority for Elections of Tunisia (ISIE), the institution in charge of organising elections since 2011, have been appointed directly by Saied since 2022. This has resulted in ISIE only approving three candidates to run in the presidential elections – one of which was Saied. Several candidates have challenged the decision before administrative courts. Three of them, Imed Daimi, Mondher Znaidi, and Abdellatif Mekki, won their appeals, and the court decided to reinstate them as candidates.

However, on 1 September, ISIE rejected the binding court ruling and refused to implement it. Thus, the only candidates in the running on election day were Saied, Ayachi Zammel – who was sentenced to 12 years in prison a few weeks prior to the elections after being found guilty on several charges – and Zouhair Maghzaoui, who only received 1.97 per cent of the vote.



The party of opposition leader Ayachi Zammel, who was sentenced to 12 years in prison, days before the 6 October elections. ©Severine Sajous

These actions clearly violate the separation of powers enshrined in the democratic constitution of 2014. Indeed, critics see these measures as threatening the democratic gains made since the Tunisian revolution and the overthrow of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime in 2011, accusing Saied of an "authoritarian drift", a "constitutional coup", a "self-coup" or a "military-backed coup".

“We are returning to the dictatorial regime of the Ben Ali period, but in a much more difficult world and with a dictator who, unlike his predecessor, plays, at least rhetorically, with nationalistic, populist, and anti-colonialist ideas,” says the Spanish philosopher and writer Santiago Alba. “He is a kind of sad Gaddafi.”

The demolition of democracy

Unlike its neighbouring Arab countries, which also experienced massive popular uprisings in 2011, Tunisia did not immediately revert to authoritarianism or descend into civil war.

“The impression that things were better before (under Ben Ali) goes beyond culture,” says Tunisian writer Hatem Nafti. “There was a kind of tacit agreement: secure a minimum living standard for a large part of the population in exchange for freedom. Today, the economic situation has deteriorated significantly and the number of people who are able to enjoy freedom is decreasing.”

Many foreign observers and some of Tunisia’s political elites have celebrated the country as the Arab world’s only democracy. President Saied’s expansion of presidential powers has shaken the political system, calling into question the future of Tunisian democracy but also highlighting deep-rooted cracks in the country’s democratic framework.

“The problem is that we knew from the get-go that he doesn’t believe in debate,” says Mustapha Tlili, a professor of modern history and civil society activist, who is a former leader of the Tunisian Human Rights League. “He doesn’t believe in experts. He doesn’t believe in elites – quite the contrary. He continues to demonise everyone, the power elites, experts, political parties, organisations, human rights associations, etcetera. He wants to demonise everyone.”

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Nevertheless, after years of irritation with the country’s political elites, many Tunisians welcomed the president’s decisions. They see them as part of the fight against corruption and foreign interference. This popular support could be seen at the polls, where most of the people willing to speak to the press praised Saied for jailing members of the opposition, whom they described as “terrorists”, “corrupt”, or “doing deals with other countries”. It’s a populist discourse focused on eradicating corruption, backroom deals, and political conspiracies.

Saied sells slogans such as “I am with the poor”, “I like the poor”, and “The rich are corrupting our neighbourhoods.” “He has created a dichotomy in which there is only good and evil; he represents good, and the others are all evil,” Tlili laments. “Those who are not with him are conspiring with foreigners and don’t want to defend the nation. He is under the impression that he is leading a war of national liberation, and he reiterates that belief whenever he appears on television or on the radio.”

Dissenting voices in the country are being repressed, with journalists, lawyers, politicians, activists, dissidents, and human rights defenders thrown in prison. To this end, over the past two years Saied has used a controversial law that criminalises the dissemination of “false information”. Amnesty International has [described](#) Decree 54, which severely limits freedom of expression, as one of the harshest measures passed in Tunisia in over a decade.

A young Tunisian artist, who prefers to remain anonymous for fear of being arrested (a member of his family has been in prison for several months due to his social media posts), is convinced that “this regime cannot last.” He appeared downhearted during his interview with the *Green European Journal*, which took place the day after the elections. “The president wants people to believe that the West, colonisation, and the European Union are to blame for everything.”



Civil society organises demonstrations to defend the rights acquired during the revolution and undermined by the president. ©Severine Sajous

It is true that, despite criticism, discontent, and several demonstrations during three years of repression, attempts to unseat Saied have been unsuccessful. “Fear is not the only reason, but it helps reduce opposition and even people’s degree of politicisation,” Nafti said. “One chapter of my book is entitled ‘The Twilight of Politics’. The splintering of the opposition and the fact that the regime has created its own laws, systematically disregarding checks and balances, also play a role.”

Nafti, author of *Our Friend Kais Saied* (Riveneuve, 2024) and a member of the Tunisian Observatory of Populism, resides in Paris and has not travelled to Tunisia since February 2023. “Several lawyers have advised me not to return to Tunisia because I risk being imprisoned. There are people in prison on charges that are much vaguer than the ones brought against me. I received serious death threats and discovered that I was being followed outside my home in Paris.”

When asked about Saied’s personality, he replied: “It took me more than two books to describe him. If I had to sum him up in one sentence, I would say that he is someone who is out to get revenge on the elites who never took him seriously – especially because he never received a doctorate – and who believes himself to be tasked with an almost messianic mission. Opposing him is blasphemy.”

Tunisia on the international stage

This situation has implications for the broader international community and for Tunisia’s relationship with Europe. Until the constitutional change in 2022, Tunisia’s main benefactors were the US, as well as the EU and its member states, which provided the country with more than 1.3 billion dollars in economic assistance each year. The US has withdrawn its aid and reprimanded Saied for his actions. Europe, for its part, has focused more on Tunisia’s ability to curb the flow of migrants than on advancing democracy in the country. Thus, at the same time as the EU was withdrawing its financial aid, it was sending funds to strengthen the border police.

Currently, Tunisia’s main allies are Algeria and Libya, especially in terms of energy supply. For financial resources, it looks to Saudi Arabia, as well as some European countries, such as Italy, with whom it has also signed a deal to fight illegal migration. Kuwait also reaffirmed its “support for the decisions of President Kais Saied and its confidence in his ability to overcome the challenges that the country is facing and achieve the aspirations of the Tunisian people.”

Migration pact with Europe

The plight of migrants in Tunisia took a tragic turn in 2023. Under pressure from the Italian government of Georgia Meloni, the

EU signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia in July 2023 aimed at “addressing the migration crisis in an integrated manner.” In a presidential statement made in February of that same year, Saied claimed that “the undeclared goal of sub-Saharan Africans is to change the demographic composition of Tunisia.”

The speech, and in particular, the president’s racist comments and his espousal of the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory – which followed months of racist social media campaigns by the regime – had immediate repercussions. Citizen mobs assaulted and robbed sub-Saharan Africans while the police carried out raids and arrests. This climate of terror led to an influx of migrants to Sfax, a coastal city in southern Tunisia and the departure point for the Italian island of Lampedusa.



Hundreds of sub-Saharan Africans survive in unsanitary conditions in the Jbeniana camp in the Sfax region. ©Severine Sajous

Several makeshift camps have now been set up in olive groves a few kilometres from Sfax, where sub-Saharan migrants are enduring unsanitary conditions, biding their time until they can try their luck and embark on the dangerous journey to Italy. They are often detained by the coast guard, who seize all their belongings and imprison them or take them to the Algerian or Libyan desert, where they are left without food or water and where many of them perish. The suffering extends to the local population of Jbeniana and El Amra, who live under constant threat of violence and conflict, both from the police and from the migrants themselves. The prevailing insecurity has led to widespread protests from locals, who are frustrated with the mishandling of migration in the region.

Tunisia’s treatment of migrants is in breach of the Memorandum of Understanding with Europe, which states that the migration approach “shall be based on respect for human rights”. For this reason, Amnesty International said in a [letter](#) to the European Council: “To remain true to their human rights commitments, the EU and its Member States should reconsider their approach to cooperation with Tunisia, and take steps to address the systematic attacks on the rule of law and separation of powers in the country, the crackdown on rights and freedoms, and the violence targeting Black African asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants in the country.”

In a context of growing xenophobia, Tunisia effectively acts as a border agent for the EU, with Europe providing the country with financial support so that it may secure the equipment, training, and technical support necessary for migration control. This role is a key pillar of the Memorandum, with an initial 105 million euros allocated for search and rescue vessels, jeeps, radars, drones and other types of patrol equipment.

The implementation of these controls has led to a significant reduction in migrant arrivals to Europe, down by more than 80 per cent compared to 2023. According to Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesperson for FTDES, it comes as “the Tunisian authorities have mobilised a large number of human resources, both on land and at sea, to minimise the number of Tunisians

migrating to European territories. Europeans are very satisfied, that is to say, they evaluate or measure success quantitatively by the number of migrants arriving in Europe.”



Two boats carrying sub-Saharan migrants who have been intercepted by police and abandoned in a port on Kerkennah Island. ©Severine Sajous

Additionally, the President has agreed to allow the return and readmission of Tunisian nationals with irregular status from the European Union, and to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of irregular migrants in Tunisia to their home countries, with assistance from the International Organization for Migration and the UNHCR. Some of these migrants are Tunisian citizens fleeing the country’s repressive policies, but others come from faraway places such as Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

“The Tunisian authorities do not provide figures on deportations, but these happen at Tabarka airport, a region bordering Algeria,” Ben Amor explains. “It’s a calm place; there is no activity, there are no planes except for the planes carrying the deportees. Which means there are no witnesses to the deportations.

“Therefore, Europe has essentially green-lit violations against migrants in Tunisia. The European Union turns a blind eye to what is happening in Tunisia, with cautious statements that fail to criticise the abuse of human rights. They fall short of addressing the situation in Tunisia, so the European Union is legitimising what is happening there. The UN rapporteurs, for example, are more direct and have clearer messages.”

Green strategy

Another key area of European interest in Tunisia is its potential for green energy development. Aware of Tunisia’s renewable energy potential, the European Union has signed the Green Energy Transition Memorandum, which outlines a strategy to enhance sustainable growth and job creation in the area. This partnership will help strengthen the security of energy supply and provide citizens and businesses with low-carbon energy at competitive prices.



An image of President Kais Saied is prominently displayed in a shop window, surrounded by other well-known world leaders. ©Severine Sajous

In addition, within the framework of the Connecting Europe Facility, the EU has committed 307.6 million euros for the development of ELMED, a power line allowing Tunisia and Italy to trade low-cost renewable electricity, and up to 150 million euros for the construction of Medusa, a submarine cable that will use fibre optic technology to connect 11 countries around the Mediterranean. These projects will combine grants from the EU budget and loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB). This partnership will also address the instruments and regulations needed to enable Tunisia to export renewable energy and other products to the EU in view of the introduction of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM).

Obviously, the European Union will be closely monitoring developments in Tunisia. After the elections and despite the adverse outlook, Tunisians express a certain optimism that the situation can change.

“There are two interpretations or visions of what is happening: some say that the regime of Kais Saied is merely a phase, that such periods are a necessary part of the democratic learning process; others say it signals the end of the Revolution and see it as a step backwards,” says a cartoonist known as Z, author of the blog *Debatunisie* and a critic of the regime. “As an optimist, I’d rather embrace the first view.”



Severine Sajous studied linguistics at the Paul Valéry University of Montpellier. She worked as an accountant for nine years before turning to communications and visual documentary. Most of her work to date has focused on migration and the idea of belonging. Her work has appeared in various international media outlets, as well as in collective and solo exhibitions. Severine co-founded the association [Jungleye](#).



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