



Institute of
International
Studies

DEPT. OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
UNIVERSITAS GADJAH MADA



IIS BRIEF

● Issue 2 / 2024

Democracy Under Siege:

The Rise of Authoritarianism in Tunisia

Rachmania Utami Tsalasa Putri

Democracy Under Siege: The Rise of Authoritarianism in Tunisia

Introduction

The Arab Spring movement in Middle Eastern countries is regarded as an important momentum for democratisation in the region. In Egypt, the Arab Spring overthrew the authoritarian Mubarak regime, but the ensuing political crisis allowed the military to seize power. In Yemen, the political upheaval triggered by the Arab Spring led to a civil war. Tunisia is the only country where democratisation continued after the Arab Spring. However, the hope of democratisation in Tunisia is now fading. Why is this happening?

After the impeachment of President Zainal Abidin Ibn Ali, also known as Ben Ali, in 2011, Tunisia began its democratisation journey characterised by democratic presidential elections and a series of institutional reforms. As per Huntington's two-turnover test (1993), Tunisia was considered successful in democratising itself after two peaceful transitions of power and fair elections in 2014 and 2019. Tunisia tried to consolidate its democracy by adopting consensus-based constitutions to prevent identity polarisation (Meddeb, 2022; Yerkes, 2022; Huber & Pisciotto, 2022). However, as the years passed, the political elites who came into power seemed more preoccupied with maintaining a fragile peace between the Islamist and secularist factions and giving civil societies veto power rather than addressing the economic decline, which worsened living conditions (Yerkes, 2022; Meddeb, 2022; Zaki, 2022).

The presence of numerous stakeholders with the power to veto governmental decisions resulted in the lack of significant reform. Thus halting the development of robust democratic governance and maintaining the same economic structure as Ben Ali's regime. Tunisia's inability to enact substantial fiscal reforms has led

to a reliance on aid to finance essential public expenditures and budget deficits (Samarin, 2024; Yssen, 2022). This dependence on aid reflects a deterioration in economic conditions compared to pre-democratic transition periods (Zaki, 2022). Consequently, the government's shortcomings have left Tunisians feeling fatigued and increasingly sceptical about the democratic promises (Cherif, 2022). The lack of tangible improvement in their daily lives has fostered frustration and resentment among the populace—creating a fertile ground for populist leaders like Kais Saied to employ populist rhetoric (Koehler, 2023).

The ascension of Kais Saied was primarily due to widespread disillusionment among Tunisians with the government, which consistently failed to address the people's grievances. Saied criticised the existing political system, often blaming bureaucratic inefficiencies and political infighting for the country's stagnation (Duran, 2021). His sentiment resonates with many Tunisians who feel abandoned by the political elite. Hence, Saied's rise to power has been marked by efforts to dismantle democratic institutions in favour of a centralised, direct form of governance, which he argues is necessary to overcome Tunisia's economic and political challenges. However, following the rise of Kais Saied to the presidency in October 2019, there has been a trend of autocratisation in Tunisia.

Saied has made several reforms that hampered the check and balances system, which was intended to restrain the chief executive's power. He tapped into the deep-seated frustrations of the people, presenting himself as a champion of the ordinary citizen against a disconnected and self-serving political class. He argued that the democratic institutions established post-revolution were ineffective and corrupt, thus proposing a more direct form of democracy as a solution (Duran, 2021). Once in power, Saied began systematically dismantling Tunisia's democratic institutions to consolidate his executive authority.

Consequently, Tunisia's democratic breakdown can be attributed to three intersecting variables: weak democratic institutions, economic grievances, and authoritarian intent from the chief executive. Weak democratic institutions failed to establish a resilient system capable of withstanding political crises, while economic grievances fueled public discontent and provided a platform for populist rhetoric. Hence, the emergence of Kais Saied, who capitalised on these vulnerabilities, has led to the decline of Tunisia's democracy.

Tunisia's failure to consolidate democracy

Tunisia's success in democratisation through consensus-based politics paradoxically led to a representation crisis, which facilitated Kais Saied's rise to power (Koehler, 2023). Instead of creating a balanced and inclusive political environment, this paradox resulted in the hollowing of representative politics and effective governance. Between 2011 and 2014, the Tunisian political elite focused primarily on addressing challenges related to identity-based polarisation and the rise of extremist groups (Koehler, 2023; Yerkes, 2019). They adopted a consensus-based system to contain the Islamist and secularist divide (Koehler, 2023; Huber & Pisciotta, 2022; Rivera-Escartin, 2021). Moreover, the democratisation process also opened the way for the then-repressed civil society organisations to enter the political arena, complicating the political landscape (Kilavuz, 2022; Schäfer, 2015).

As per Peter Mair (2013), regarding the hollowing of democracy, political parties served as people's representatives, who articulate people's interests, aggregate demands, and translate collective preferences into distinct policy options. However, as political elites in Tunisia prioritised maintaining the fragile peace between differing political factions (Yerkes, 2022; Meddeb, 2022; Zaki, 2022), ordinary citizens found themselves inadequately represented in their pursuit of socio-economic rights (Huber & Pisciotta, 2022). Widespread disengagement from the political arena occurs, leading to the hollowing of Tunisia's democracy. As per Meddeb (2022), the power-sharing agreement that initially bolstered Tunisia's nascent democracy is increasingly becoming problematic when implementing much-needed reforms. To illustrate, the empowerment of civil society groups—particularly in the corporate sector, such as the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA)—has impeded necessary financial reforms aimed at reducing central government debt, which accumulated due to Tunisia's reliance on aid for financing essential public expenditures and budget deficits (Samarin, 2024; Yssen, 2022). Consensus politics has granted corporate representatives veto power and significant leverage to block reforms that might conflict with their constituencies' interests. Governments became vulnerable, needing to secure the consent of these veto players to stay in office. Thus, paradoxically, the compromise has constrained political parties'

ability to represent their social constituencies. Stripped of substantive meaning, Tunisians then perceived democracy as largely ineffective, leading to widespread disengagement from the political arena (Koehler, 2023).

Many of the regulations that facilitated corruption and cronyism during Ben Ali's regime remained essentially unchanged, leading to the proliferation of corrupt practices (Kilavuz, 2022; Huber & Pisciotta, 2022; Zaki, 2022). This issue was exacerbated when a law was passed in 2017 granting amnesty to public officials and business partners involved in corruption during the Ben Ali era. Over half of Nidaa Tounes legislators, including President Ebessi, were former ruling members in the authoritarian era, with some being linked to past state violence and corruption (Yssen, 2022; Rivera-Escartin, 2021). These connections and the continued influence of former regime insiders perpetuated a system where corruption could thrive unchecked, further eroding public trust in the government and its commitment to meaningful reform.

As Tunisia's political parties stopped functioning as effective intermediaries between civil society and the state, their core contribution to democracy, representation and responsive governance suffered. Tunisia's political parties forwent their representative role in trying to govern responsibly by keeping the peace between factions. This move facilitated the disengagement of the political elites from the ordinary citizens. Consequently, the disenchantment with traditional political structures grew, paving the way for alternative political movements and leaders.

The people's economic grievances

Following the revolution, Tunisia's government placed an excessive emphasis on state securitisation in response to the multiple terrorist attacks in 2015. According to Günay & Somavilla (2019), the then-president, President Ebessi, used the fight against extremism as a pretext to expand his power at the expense of parliament and independent bodies, thereby legitimising the retrenchment of the newly gained democratic rights. Moreover, the focus on counter-terrorism diverted a significant portion of the budget from essential socio-economic areas, such as poverty alleviation and youth unemployment. With 15% of Tunisia's budget allocated to military armament and surveillance technology, this focus only

worsened socio-economic conditions and impeded essential economic reforms. Tunisia's post-revolution economic policies have also led to significant debt accumulation due to its reliance on foreign aid (Samarin, 2024; Yssen, 2022). This heavy reliance on aid started with the Troika government's 2.6 billion dollar loan in 2013 and continued under subsequent administrations (Yssen, 2022). As per Meddeb (2022), the trend has substantially increased Tunisia's external debt, rising from 49% of the GDP in 2010 to 85% in 2019. Likewise, the country's average GDP growth rate declined from 4.6% in 2006–2010 to 1.8% in 2011–2015. Moreover, between 2015 and 2019, the average GDP growth rate further decreased to 1.6% before sharply declining to negative 8.7% in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. These macroeconomic trends exacerbated public finances' imbalances, as the budget deficit increased from 3.4% of GDP in 2011 to 11.4% in 2020.

Even before the pandemic, Tunisia's once robust middle class had diminished over the past decade, with nominal per-capita GDP falling below the World Bank's upper middle-income threshold (currently set at \$4,096) in 2015 and continuing its downward spiral to \$3,323 in 2020 (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Persistent issues of unemployment, regional inequality, and inadequate access to public services further highlight the decline of the middle class. Economic and social indicators reveal that the situation in Tunisia has largely remained unchanged since the revolution. National unemployment rates have stagnated at around 15%, while youth unemployment for the 15-24 age group has hovered near 34% as of 2019 (Yssen, 2022; Yerkes, 2019; McDowall, 2019). This lack of meaningful employment, particularly for youth and university graduates, remained unresolved in Tunisia's new democracy. Although poverty levels had slightly decreased since the revolution, regional inequalities persisted and, in some cases, worsened. The lack of access to public services and other necessities, such as electricity and clean water, remained a significant issue in the South and North-West regions.

Tunisia's descent into autocratic rule

As per its definition, populism operates on a Manichean conception of society. It divides people into distinct categories of the “good” and the “outsider”, often leading to the exclusion and antagonisation of those outside the favoured group (Kellam & Benasaglio Berlucci, 2023; Rivera-Escartin, 2023). In Tunisia, political elites were portrayed as adversaries of ordinary citizens due to their failure to address the populace’s grievances and, at times, exacerbating them. This portrayal was crafted by the populist leader, Kais Saied, who capitalised on societal discontent to bolster his agenda.

Saied argued that democracy has failed to bring the improvements that were promised to ordinary Tunisians. Thus, a new approach is needed. He contended that the democratic process was bogged down by inefficiency and corruption, preventing meaningful economic progress and exacerbating existing inequalities. Therefore, he suggests a direct form of democracy. Saied claimed he could streamline governance and expedite decision-making by centralising authority and bypassing the traditional checks and balances systems (Duran, 2021). This executive aggrandisement was coupled with the usage of democratic-looking ideologies to legitimise an authoritarian power grab. Coined as democratic authoritarianism by Bajpai and Kureshi (2019), Saied positions himself as an ordinary individual capable of enacting the people’s will for regime reform, presumably to a “better” democracy. Hence, his ascent to power, along with the subsequent dismantling and replacement of crucial democratic principles, gained acceptance from the populace. Saied then implemented institutional and ideational capture to consolidate his position further, such as strategically appointing loyalists to oversee institutions, reshaping rules to shape legislation, and selectively deploying security forces to suppress opposition.

Tunisia’s autocratisation process can be seen through Lürhmann’s (2021, cited by Yssen, 2022) model of the autocratisation sequence. Firstly, the citizens were discontent with their current democratic options as they were seen as incapable of meeting the populace’s economic grievances (Zaki, 2022). Tunisians saw the current political elites have an excessive focus on maintaining harmony and moderation amidst the primary political camps of Islamists and secularists. This results in disregarding substantive representation and further alienating the

citizens from the political process (Koehler, 2023). Therefore, Saied advocacy for more direct democracy is viewed as a breath of fresh air, resonating with those disillusioned by the shortcomings of the existing political structure. Secondly, Saied utilised a populist strategy to attain power, garnering backing from the people he purportedly represented in a bid against the corrupt elite in control (Huber & Pisciotta, 2022). Finally, he undertook the disassembly and substitution of democratic institutions involving the dissolution of the Constitution and the placement of his loyalists in key positions.

Tunisia's periodisation as a budding democracy and downfall into autocracy was reflected in Figure 1. Using the electoral democracy index (based on Dahl polyarchy), Tunisia's score was 0.193 in 2010, a year before the overthrow of President Ben Ali. Following the revolution, the score increased significantly to 0.769 by 2012, marking a period of democratisation. This relatively high score was sustained until 2021, when it sharply dropped to 0.538 and declined to 0.307 in 2022. These declines correspond with President Kais Saied's consolidation of power and the erosion of democratic institutions—illustrating the country's shift toward autocracy.

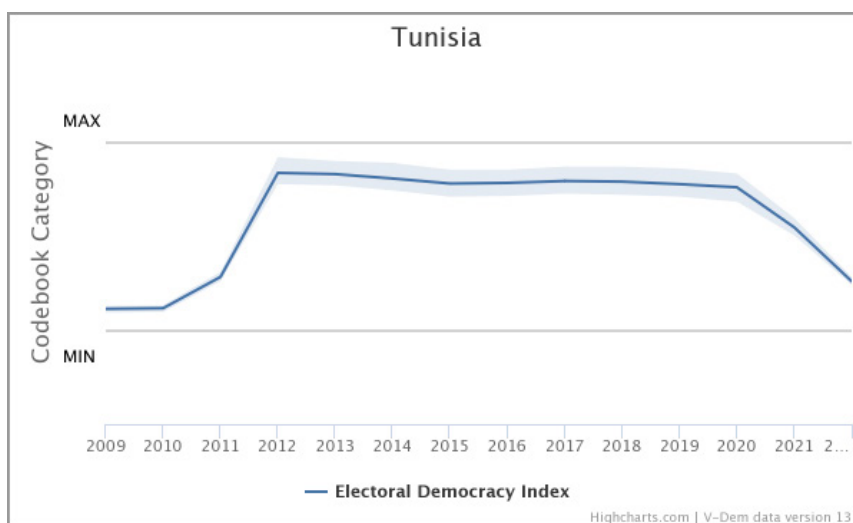


Figure 1.

Note. V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index of Tunisia (V-Dem, 2023).

According to Yerkes (2022), President Saied has implemented a series of changes in recent years that have eroded Tunisia's democratic institutions. Firstly, parliamentary powers were transferred to the president via the implementation of Decree 117. This, in effect, allowed him to rule without parliamentary consideration, thus undermining the role of parliament and limiting the checks and balances of the executive (Cherif, 2022; Lang, 2022; MacDiarmid, 2021). Secondly, Saied undertook measures to squash dissenting voices, employing tactics such as arbitrary arrests, travel restrictions, and violent assaults targeting journalists, activists, and political rivals. Tunisia's military and police forces facilitated the execution of these actions. Additionally, military tribunals were utilised to apprehend and convict Saied's political adversaries. At the same time, security and police personnel played a significant role in deploying repressive methods during protests and organisational gatherings of the opposition. Lastly, Saied dissolved Tunisia's Supreme Judicial Council, substituting its members with his loyalists. Additionally, he granted himself the authority to dismiss judges, exercising this power to remove 57 judges and modify the Constitution.

Conclusion

Tunisia serves as an interesting case study of the post-Arab Spring democratic transition. It has demonstrated a relatively successful transition compared to other nations in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. However, as the transition and consolidation of democracy overlooked the populace's economic grievances, Tunisia's success began to unravel. The failure to implement significant economic reforms disappointed the public, creating an opportunity for regime change that Saied capitalised.

The rise of Kais Saied to power has been marked by increasing criticism due to his ambitious but controversial methods, as Saied contends that the democratic process itself has hindered Tunisia's economic progress. His tenure has highlighted three main factors contributing to the fading of democracy in Tunisia: weak democratic institutions, persistent economic grievances, and authoritarian tendencies from the executive branch. These factors have compounded to create a precarious political environment. While Tunisians initially embraced the promise of multi-party politics and empowered civil society following the overthrow of

President Ben Ali, the prioritisation of consensus politics over meaningful reform and the neglect of pressing economic issues gradually eroded public trust in the democratic process. This disillusionment created fertile ground for the ascent of populist leaders like Saied, who capitalised on public frustration to consolidate power and undermine democratic norms. Saied's critique of the existing democratic system as inefficient and corrupt struck a chord with disillusioned citizens, leading to a shift towards authoritarianism characterised by dismantling democratic institutions and the concentration of power in the hands of the executive.

Despite initial successes, Tunisia's democratic transition has faltered due to the failure to implement substantial economic reforms. This demonstrates that the sustainability of democratic transition and consolidation requires political consensus and the effective functioning of political institutions that address the people's needs. Additionally, it reveals how a leader with authoritarian ambitions can exploit institutional weaknesses and public discontent to consolidate power.

References

- Bajpai, R., & Kureshi, Y. (2022). Mechanisms of democratic authoritarianism: de-centring the executive in South Asia and beyond. *Democratization*, 29(8), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2062324>
- Cherif, Y. (2022, July 28). *Tunisia: the dismantling of a democracy*. Elcano Royal Institute. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/tunisia-the-dismantling-of-a-democracy/>
- Congressional Research Service. (2021). *Tunisia: In Brief*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21666>
- Duran, B. (2021, July 28). *The populist coup in Tunisia*. SETA. <https://www.setav.org/en/the-populist-coup-in-tunisia/>
- Günay, C., & Somnavilla, F. (2019). Tunisia's democratization at risk. *Mediterranean Politics*, 25(5), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2019.1631980>
- Huber, D., & Pisciotta, B. (2022). From democracy to hybrid regime. Democratic backsliding and populism in Hungary and Tunisia. *Contemporary Politics*, 29(3), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2162210>

- Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The Third Wave : Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kellam, M., & Benasaglio Berlucchi, A. (2023). Who's to blame for democratic backsliding: populists, presidents or dominant executives? *Democratization*, 30(5), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2190582>
- Kilavuz, M. T. (2022). *The Road to July 25: The Problems of Democratic Consolidation in Tunisia*. Al Sharq Strategic Research. <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/03/01/consolidation-in-tunisia/>
- Koehler, K. (2023). Breakdown by disengagement: Tunisia's transition from representative democracy. *Political Research Exchange*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736x.2023.2279778>
- Lang, J. (2024, May 30). *Consensus Politics Has Failed Tunisia*. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/16/tunisia-elections-kais-saied-ennahda-ben-ali-democ>
- Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1–19.
- MacDiarmid, C. (2021, July 27). *Kais Saied: Tunisia's "Robocop" president and his grab for power*. The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2021/07/27/kais-saied-tunisias-robocop-preside-nt-grab-power/>
- Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the void : the hollowing of Western democracy*. Verso, , Cop.
- McDowall, A. (2019, December 3). Explainer: Tunisia grapples with post-revolution economic slide. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-economy-explainer-idUSKBN1Y72B9>
- Meddeb, H. (2022). Tunisia's Democratic Backsliding: The Revenge of the Economy. In *Global Lessons for Tunisia's Stalled Transition* (pp. 50–58). Carnegie Endowment.
- Rivera-Escartin, A. (2021). Tunisia's democratisation process: when "consensus democracy" undermines democratic consolidation. *Third World Quarterly*, 43(2), 414–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.2015315>
- Rivera-Escartin, A. (2023). Elite polarization and democratic backsliding in Tunisia: tracing agency-driven mechanisms. *Democratization*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2284873>

- Samarin, M. (2024). *Tunisia: desk study on aid and democracy*. <https://doi.org/10.35188/unu-wider/mfti6228>
- Schäfer, I. (2015). *The Tunisian Transition: Torn Between Democratic Consolidation and Neo-Conservatism in an Insecure Regional Context*. https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/Tunisian_Transition_EuroMeSCo_Paper_25_Isabel_Schaefer.pdf
- V-Dem. (2023). *Country Graph: Tunisia*. V-Dem.net. https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph
- Yerkes, S. (2022). Global Lessons for Tunisia's Stalled Transition. In *Global Lessons for Tunisia's Stalled Transition* (pp. 58–66). Carnegie Endowment.
- Yerkes, S. E. (2019, October 15). *The Tunisia Model*. Foreign Affairs; Foreign Affairs Magazine. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/2019-10-15/tunisia-model>
- Yerkes, S. E. (2022, August 15). The End of the Tunisia Model. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/tunisia/end-tunisia-model>
- Yssen, S. S. F. (2022). Autocratization and Civil Society Response in Tunisia A Qualitative Case Study [Master Thesis].
- Zaki, H. A. (2022, May 27). *The Tunisian Public and the Rise of Kais Saied*. *Www.brandeis.edu*. <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/crown-conversations/cc-13.html>

Rachmania Utami Tsalasa Putri
Mahasiswa Hubungan Internasional
Universitas Gadjah Mada
[*rachmania.utami1003@mail.ugm.ac.id*](mailto:rachmania.utami1003@mail.ugm.ac.id)

Setiap tulisan yang dimuat dalam IIS Brief merupakan pendapat personal penulis dan tidak merepresentasikan posisi Institute of International Studies.

About Us

IIS Brief is a space for researchers and students from the UGM Department of International Relations to convey their ideas on the latest international issues. This periodical publication can be written in both Bahasa Indonesia and English. IIS Brief has an academic and service approach to those interested in International Relations studies. Please reach out to the editorial team for any inquiries at publication.iis@ugm.ac.id.



Institute of International Studies (IIS) is an Indonesian leading research institute under the Department of International Relations, Universitas Gadjah Mada. Established in 2010, it commits to developing a theoretical understanding of international relations through the perspective of Global South and incorporating them at the practical level for the actualisation of peace and justice.

iis.fisipol.ugm.ac.id



for more information about this brief, please contact:

IIS Publication Division
Tria Nadila +62 813 8153 7878
publication.iis@ugm.ac.id



**Institute of
International
Studies**

DEPT. OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
UNIVERSITAS GADJAH MADA