

Attitudinal Foundations of Democratic Decline in Tunisia

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On 25 July 2021, Tunisian president Kais Saied dissolved parliament and dismissed the prime minister. In what appeared to observers of Tunisian politics as a ‘power grab,’¹ Saied doubled down on his bold move less than two months later by announcing his intention to dissolve parliament indefinitely and suspend the country’s constitution. These events in Tunisia may quite well mark the beginning of the end of the only post-Arab Spring democratic success story. While Saied’s move has surprised many observers, it has in fact been in the making for some time. Tunisians’ mounting disenchantment with the political establishment not only led to the election of Kais Saied himself—a candidate outside of the established party system who rose to the presidency in 2019—but also provided the popular support base for the president’s recent power grab.

Countries transitioning to democracy often suffer from weak party systems, socioeconomic instability, and political unrest, creating fertile ground for such attitudes to take root. Tunisia is no stranger to the political and economic growth pains of democratic transitions. It has in fact experienced a troubled transformation since protestors overthrew Ben Ali’s dictatorship in January of 2011. While the country witnessed competitive parliamentary elections in 2011, 2014, and 2019, along with the promulgation of a new constitution in 2014, Tunisia has also been hampered by political gridlock, economic stagnation, and virulent street protests.² In the process, popular support for both democratic institutions and established political parties, such as the Islamist party Ennahda and the secular party Nidaa Tounes, have declined in recent years. In turn, electoral support for political outsiders has been on the rise.³

Drawing on data from the Afrobarometer project and our own, nationally representative telephone survey among adult Tunisians conducted in 2017, we unpack the attitudinal foundations of democratic decline in Tunisia.⁴ While many studies have measured levels of trust in democratic institutions, far less has been written about popular support for political alternatives. What type of alternatives to the status-quo do citizens support in countries transitioning to democracy, and why do they support such alternatives?

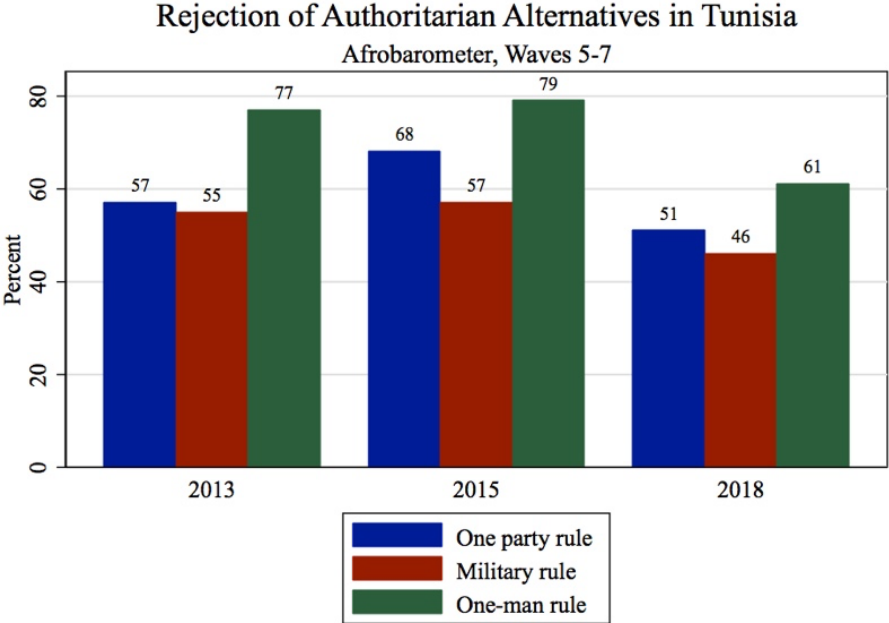
¹ Grewal, Sharan. 2021. “Kais Saied’s Power Grab in Tunisia.” *Brookings: Order from Chaos*, blog post (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/07/26/kais-saieds-power-grab-in-tunisia/>).

² Antonakis-Nashif, Anna. 2016. “Contested transformation: Mobilized publics in Tunisia between compliance and protest,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 21(1), pp. 128-149.

³ Grewal, Sharan and Shadi Hamid. 2020. *The Dark Side of Consensus in Tunisia: Lessons from 2015-2019*, Foreign Policy at Brookings, No. 1, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-dark-side-of-consensus-in-tunisia-lessons-from-2015-2019/>.

⁴ Albrecht, Holger, Dina Bishara, Michael Bufano, and Kevin Koehler. 2021. “Popular Support for Military Intervention and Anti-Establishment Alternatives in Tunisia: Appraising Outsider Eclecticism.” *Mediterranean Politics*, open access at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2021.1974691>.

The chart below reports data from several rounds of the Afrobarometer surveys in Tunisia, which shows that the number of respondents rejecting authoritarian alternatives declined over time. Tunisians have remained suspicious of one-man rule because they presumably associate this type of autocracy with the discredited Ben Ali regime. Yet, by 2018, about half of the population did not rule out one-party or military versions of authoritarian rule, which implies not only an obvious vote of no confidence to the emerging multi-party democracy in the country, but also some genuine sympathy for specific authoritarian alternatives.

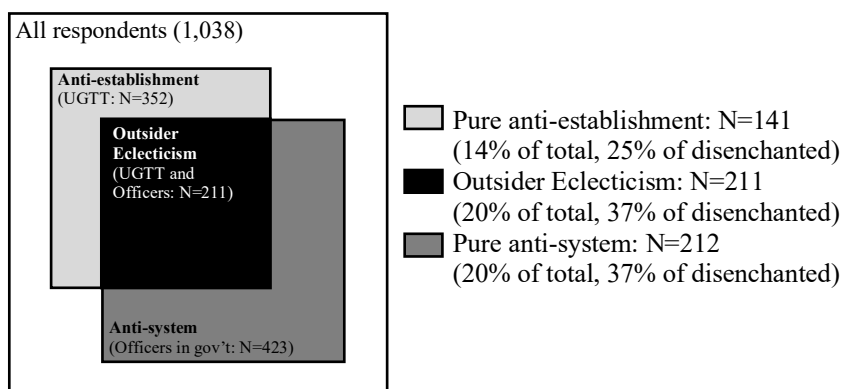


We dug deeper into the question of possible political alternatives Tunisians have in mind in opposition to the political status quo. Beyond rather abstract notions of authoritarian regime types, we designed our own nationally representative survey to gauge popular support for existing political forces in the country that represent different types of opposition to the status quo. We argue there are three distinct types of attitudes in support of political outsiders: anti-system, anti-establishment, and outsider eclecticism. Individuals with anti-system attitudes support alternatives to the current regime type, for instance military or one-party rule. In contrast, individuals with anti-establishment attitudes support the current political regime but oppose the organizational infrastructure, that is, the existing political parties and their elites. Finally, some Tunisians are ready to support anything but the status quo, a set of attitudes we call ‘outsider eclecticism.’

Leveraging the results from our 2017 survey, we demonstrate the degree to which these three distinct attitudes have emerged in Tunisia—an unmistakable harbinger for what would be the popular support base for both the election of Kais Saied to the presidency in 2019, as well as for his ultimate power grab in the summer of 2021. Anti-system attitudes in Tunisia are best reflected in support for military rule as the most obvious form of an authoritarian alternative to the existing political order. Our data show that approximately 40 per cent of the Tunisian population support

the idea of officers holding positions in government.⁵ In contrast, anti-establishment attitudes are best reflected in popular support for an electoral challenge by the country’s largest labor union, the Tunisian General Labor Union (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*, UGTT)—a union that previously has not participated in electoral politics despite its extensive popularity.⁶ Our data show that 34 per cent support the UGTT’s electoral participation and hence a civil-society alternative to the party establishment in parliament. Finally, 20 per cent of respondents in our survey, in seemingly contradictory fashion, hold eclectic attitudes in that they want anything but what they see in politics. They support both what we perceive empirically as an authoritarian turn and a civil-society alternative: officers serving in government *and* the UGTT as a player in parliamentary politics.

Anti-System, Anti-Establishment, and Outsider Eclecticism



Our systematic analysis reveals some interesting findings on the social constituencies particularly prone to harboring these attitudes. First, support for outsider alternatives is more widespread among younger, less educated respondents in the more marginalized regions of Tunisia. We also find that non-voters and women are more likely to look for alternatives outside of the electoral arena, while those having participated in the 2011 revolution are less likely to do so. Second, our analysis reveals that disenchantment with the status quo in Tunisia does not lead to support for a single political alternative. We find, for instance, that anti-system attitudes are more prevalent among those with an understanding of democracy that focuses on socio-economic output rather than institutional processes, while voting for Nidaa Tounes as well as membership in the UGTT are negatively associated with support for an electoral challenge by the UGTT. Finally, we find Nidaa voters in 2014 are more likely to endorse outsider eclectic preferences for political alternatives, as are those who think the UGTT and the military have a positive influence on the political situation.

While we still need to explore the social drivers of these different forms of opposition to the status quo more systematically, we know that anti-system and anti-establishment sentiments characterize

⁵ Albrecht, Holger, Michael Bufano, and Kevin Koehler. 2021. “Role Model or Role Expansion? Popular Perceptions of the Military in Tunisia,” *Political Research Quarterly*, online first.

⁶ Bishara, Dina and Sharan Grewal. 2021. “Political not partisan: The Tunisian General Labor Union under democracy,” *Comparative Politics*, online first.

political attitudes among Tunisians a decade after the Arab Spring. Empirical evidence for what we coined ‘outsider eclecticism’ amid these attitudes is surprisingly large, with one out of five adult Tunisians stating seemingly contradictory preferences for both authoritarian and civil-society alternatives. This indicates that many Tunisians want anything other than what they see in the political status quo. It is this phenomenon where we see the most robust support base for outsiders, such as president Kais Saied, and anti-democratic power grabs, such as the president’s decision to suspend parliament this past July.

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