

## Tunisian Democracy on Hold: Coup, Counter-Coup, or Creative Destruction?

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When Tunisian President Kais Saied suspended the parliament, dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechchi, and effectively shut down the country's democratic institutions on July 25, 2021, was he staging a coup d'état intended to halt the "excesses" of a democratic process run amok, initiating a counter-coup in which the basic contours of the Habib Bourguiba era (1956-1987) are being resurrected, or engaged in Schumpeterian process of incessant product and process innovation by which new production units replace outdated ones, in this instance an inchoate but flawed democratic system is completely reimagined and reconfigured to better represent "the will of the people?"

It is still too early in the suspension process to determine its eventual outcome. Distinct divisions in society have emerged between supporters of Saied's presidential power grab as a necessary step to reestablish a law-and-order state and those accusing him of nothing less than a "coup d'état" reminiscent of Ben Ali's "constitutional coup" against Bourguiba on November 7, 1987. His move lacks the fig leaf of constitutional legitimacy as provided in Article 80 that requires parliamentary consultation and approval before a state of emergency can be invoked. That the president has unilaterally extended the thirty-day suspension of parliament without constitutional approval adds weight to those concerned that Tunisia may be sliding back into its autocratic past. Not unlike similar democratic backsliding taking place in both consolidated and newly established democracies, autocratic alternatives are finding popular support by those feeling politically, socially, culturally, and/or economically marginalized. Is Tunisia another example of such backsliding or is it involved in a more structural transformation whose political outcome remains uncertain? Even more profoundly, is the country experiencing an incipient reordering of state-society relations that provides neither socioeconomic opportunity nor political freedom?

All the preconditions for systemic upheaval were fully in place on the eve of Saied's political putsch. Despite a relatively successful institutional transition from a single-party authoritarian political order into a multi-party democratic political system following the successful overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in 2011, Tunisia faced numerous social, economic, security, and health challenges that have compromised the system's democratic aspirations. The result has been a society in constant turbulence, facing popular unrest, social upheaval, economic stagnation, security threats, political fragmentation, ideological discontinuities, and a pandemic-related health emergency. It is within such a chaotic context that Saied decided to act and, in so doing, revealed the deeply fractured nature of the state-society dialectic from which autocratic tendencies have re-emerged to challenge the country's democratic future.

Despite the hopes engendered by Ben Ali's overthrow, Tunisia has been unable to overcome the ongoing and expanding challenges that it has faced. Fragile in the best of times, the economy has remained stagnant given the narrow base of its domestic production and foreign exports. Tourism, a core component of economic development, has been severely

compromised by bouts of terrorism and the Covid-19 pandemic. The dinar's steady decline since 2011 has made imports more expensive. Youth unemployment is estimated as high as 40 percent and probably even higher in the rural areas of the south. Inflation is estimated at over 7 percent, a record high. Pressures for reform come from without and within, with the IMF's recommendations to shrink the public sector and eliminate subsidies have failed to achieve the intended results while the powerful Tunisian national labor union, UGTT, has led numerous labor strikes demanding higher wages and the end of job cuts in the public sector. The result is an economy in free fall, leading Tunisians of all classes to take to the streets on almost a daily basis. Mass street protests are but one symptom of a political economy in complete disarray with the resulting increase in popular discontent, total distrust of authority figures, record low turnouts for every election held since 2011, and disenchantment with the "Jasmine Revolution" itself that have led significant sectors of the mass public to embrace an autocratic gesture of the kind Saied has undertaken.

The failure of the political class to resolve the political economy challenges described above is reflective of a deeper divide within the Tunisian polity which puts into question the commitment that both state and society have to democratic values, norms, and procedures. The experiences of the last decade have exposed the discontinuities and divergencies between the architecture of democracy (structure) and its normative underpinnings (culture). While post-authoritarian Tunisia succeeded in erecting the formal institutions of democratic governance—constitution, parliament, elections, parties—it failed to imbue them with the values, norms, and spirit of democratic belief system that would provide a cultural context for the new structures, ones that would prioritize social justice and economic reforms for society's most disadvantaged. Rather than reinforcing a more legitimate and collaborative state-society relationship, the new order has privileged those with power, money, and connections that has strained, to the point of rupture, civil society's faith in the people and institutions that were intended to represent it. One consequence has been the total distrust in politicians, parties, elections, elites, and the full constellation of authority figures. Such loss of faith finds daily expression in protest movements, desires to immigrate, occasional violence, wildcat strikes, and a dangerous disillusionment with both the idea and practice of democracy.

This disturbing trend finds expression across the full spectrum of Tunisian political life. The pre-existing ideological and personalistic cleavages between secularists and Islamists have been amplified in recent years as Rachid Ghannouchi, the head of the moderate Islamist Ennahda Party, has battled against both Presidents Essebsi and Saied, representing the country's secularist orientation, over the political, social, and economic direction of Tunisian society. Saied's power grab was in great part directed at Ghannouchi and Ennahda given the latter's dominant position in the Assembly of the People's Representatives (Legislature) with Ghannouchi serving as speaker of the Assembly. Ghannouchi has accused the Tunisian president of staging a "coup" with the intent of reasserting an autocratic system of rule.

Among the secularists themselves a moderate-right wing cleavage has emerged. While lauding the revolution's democratic outcome and constitutional foundation, many Tunisians have criticized the major economic and social failures that successive post-revolutionary regimes and leaders have left unresolved. Indeed, the vast socioeconomic cleavages that have formed since Ben Ali's overthrow have led individuals and movements to "*restaurer le passé pour faire oublier le présent.*" [restore the past to forget the present] In its most extreme form this reactionary trend has seen the rise of right-wing, anti-democratic forces emerging in the form of the Free Destourian [Constitutional] Party (*Parti Destourien Libre*) led by Abir Moussi, a woman in the image of France's Marine Le Pen and her *Rassemblement National*, both of whom invoke a mythical past as the basis for overcoming today's problems. This championing of the Destourian past of Bourguiba and Ben Ali is resonating among significant segments of the incumbent and incipient middle class that fear the indeterminacy of the ruling regime on the one hand and the putative political power of the Islamists on the other.

It is unclear if Saied's bold gestures are intended to give legitimacy to this Destourian desire or are meant as a prelude to something more transformative. What is less in doubt is the harsh way in which authority is being imposed in which the police and security services are becoming more instruments of state control than defenders of citizens' rights. Human rights activists, political opponents, and journalists and media figures who have criticized the regime prior to the "coup," have been the targets of state oppression reminiscent of the Ben Ali years. The state's recent attacks on independent journalists and media personalities in putatively democratic Tunisia highlights the ambiguity between intent and impact. As recently as April 2021, for example, Tunisian police clashed with journalists at the state news agency (TAP) demonstrating against a new chief executive whose appointment they saw as an attempt to undermine editorial independence. In a similar vein, Tunisian blogger Emma Charqui was sentenced to six months in jail for sharing a satirical Facebook post about Covid-19 written in the style of a Koranic verse. Earlier Tunisian police shut down the studios of privately-owned television broadcaster Nessma TV citing regulatory violations. While Tunisia ranks well above most Arab countries in its media and press freedoms, in a global context the 2021 World Press Freedom Index ranks Tunisia 73rd out of 180 countries (Morocco 136, Algeria 146). These recent challenges to press freedoms in Tunisia provide current context of how the post-Ben Ali media environment has altered or re-compositioned politics in the country.

In their book *How Democracies Die*, authors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt identify four key behavioral warning signs that might signal the emergence of authoritarianism: (1) rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; (2) denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; (3) toleration or encouragement of violence; and (4) readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media.<sup>1</sup> The presence of just one of these four characteristics serves as a warning that serious democratic backsliding is taking place. Saied's suspension of all key democratic institutions while imposing a martial law-like security state floats dangerously close to one or more of these behavioral signals. As posed from the start, is the Tunisian president's gesture a simple re-ordering of a flawed process for which a temporary freezing of

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), pp. 23-24.

certain political rights may seem necessary, or is it a prelude to “*restaurer le passé pour faire oublier le present*” which implies an authoritarian solution? A more generous interpretation would have Saied’s actions representing a truly revolutionary purpose, a process of “creative destruction” intent in forming a political system that is genuinely democratic with legal commitments to social justice, economic opportunity, and an egalitarian society. Most Tunisians would hope for the latter but are fearful that authoritarianism is at their doorstep.