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Tunisia's Turbulence: On the Road to Economic and Political Collapse

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Thousands of Tunisians took to the streets of the capital Tunis in mid-March, demonstrating against Tunisian president Kais Saied's July 2021 power grab and the country's ongoing economic crisis. Citing alleged threats to Tunisia's political order, Saied dismissed the government on July 25, 2021, suspended parliament, and moved to rule by decree. Critics, including opposition Islamist parties but also the country's powerful trade unions, civil society groups, and foreign experts have since assailed Saied's moves, contending that he effectively re-imposed one-man rule on Tunisia, and secured unchecked control over all branches of government. This political crisis intensified in late March, after Saied dissolved the Tunisian parliament which convened online and voted to repeal his decrees. The March protest differed from previous ones, as it was organized by the anti-Islamist Free Destourian Party (FDP), which has been critical of democratic measures adopted in Tunisia after the 2011 revolution that overthrew Zayn al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali's authoritarian regime. The protest, led by a right-wing party not unsympathetic to some of Saied's grievances, focused on the president and the deteriorating economic crisis.¹ It was another indication of Tunisia's growing unrest.

Tunisia's economic difficulties are not new. They involve high foreign debt, inflation, and unemployment. But in recent weeks, Tunisia's economic challenges have grown, as the war in Ukraine threatens to affect supplies of key staple items such as wheat. Doomsday political and economic scenarios, which could completely derail Tunisia's

¹ ["Tunisia's Opposition Holds Protest against President Saied's Power Grab,"](#) *Africa News*, March 14, 2022.

vaunted post-revolutionary success, are unfortunately no longer wildly unrealistic.² It is increasingly unclear how Tunisia can pull back from the brink, and whether it has the political, economic, and social capacity to do so. This article presents an overview of recent developments in Tunisia against the backdrop of the country's political history, and analyzes the current situation in what is frequently referred to as the [sole] success story of the 2011 Arab Spring.

Tunisia's 2011 Revolution and its Aftermath

Tunisia's history and society may be less familiar than other countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Tunisia boasts a homogenous society with a strong bureaucratic tradition and a history of centralized rule. Its colonial era (1881-1956) was relatively short compared to its neighbor Algeria, and its struggle for independence was mostly non-violent. After independence, Tunisia embraced pro-Western, moderate positions. Under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba (1956-1987), Tunisia developed its education system and advanced the status of women. Although it lacks natural resources, Tunisia's economy successfully developed sectors such as tourism. Within Tunisian society, a middle class (atypical in many Arab countries) emerged over time, placing a heavy emphasis on political and social stability.

Tunisia's revolution in 2011 against Ben 'Ali's authoritarian and corrupt regime was a surprising event in a country, which did not have a record of political or social upheavals. Despite the uncertainty of the revolution's aftermath, many Tunisians were confident the country would be able to create a new democratic order, capitalizing on its non-violent history and strong society. While Tunisia's transition was not easy, it was able to successfully hold several rounds of elections, frame a new constitution, and establish new political institutions. It also initiated a national reconciliation process, which exposed human rights violations and other abuses of the former regimes. These achievements, unprecedented in other Arab countries, qualified Tunisia in the eyes of many foreign observers as a "success" in an otherwise dismal regional political landscape.

While ordinary Tunisians would not dispute the "success" label, for many of them the post-revolutionary era has been disappointing. Much of this is related to the economy. The revolution did not generate an era of widespread development and prosperity, as many Tunisians (perhaps unrealistically) expected. Foreign investments dropped in an era of political uncertainty, and economic development stalled. Unemployment remained high (around 20 percent), and Tunisia's debt increased as the government

² "Tunisia Update: Russia-Ukraine war Hits Budget," Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), March 1, 2022.

was forced to borrow money in order to meet its financial commitments, particularly the salaries of public sector employees, which consume more than half of Tunisia's total public spending.³ The impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic and, more recently, the war in Ukraine, worsened Tunisia's economic difficulties. Tunisia imports the majority of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia, and is now forced to pay higher prices. There are growing reports of shortages of staple goods and ongoing price rises. For the second time in a month, fuel costs have increased. One astute observer of Tunisian affairs has warned that Tunisia is "absolutely up against a wall" economically, and a Lebanon-like economic collapse is not unlikely.⁴ This is a far cry from Tunisia's post-revolutionary "success" image. A deeply threatening reality has emerged.

Economic and Political Crisis

Tunisia's fiscal difficulties have forced the government to seek assistance. The country has held talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to secure a substantial loan that would help ease financial pressures. The IMF has expressed willingness to help, and stated that it made "good progress" in its technical talks with the Tunisian government. The IMF is expected to condition any loan or aid package to Tunisia on implementing an economic reform plan, which will involve a significant reduction in public spending, laying off government employees, and other painful measures. Such a plan has already sparked opposition. Tunisia's powerful labor union (UGTT) recently warned that while it is open to reforms, they must be "fair and equitable for all social groups."⁵ For his part, Tunisian president Saied warned that there are "red lines" in the government's talks with the IMF, suggesting he does not intend to accept IMF dictates. The president also vehemently criticized "criminal" business people involved in "monopolistic and speculative practices."⁶ As he has often done, Saied lashed out at government trade officials, accusing them of undermining government policies. Such criticism of government officials are fixtures of Saied's rhetoric, echoing sentiments shared by his supporters.

Closely linked to Tunisia's economic tumult is the country's political crisis. Political rumblings, reflecting public dissatisfaction with the entire political system, were

³ "Another Civilian Conviction in Military Court," Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), February 22, 2022.

⁴ "Russia-Ukraine war Hits Budget," Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), March 1, 2022; Paul Benjamin Osterlund, "[MENA Faces a Crisis as the World's Key Wheat Producers Are at War](#)," *Al Jazeera*, March 1, 2022.

⁵ "UGTT Rules Out 'Painful Reforms,'" Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), March 17, 2022.

⁶ "UGTT Rules Out 'Painful Reforms,'" Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), March 17, 2022.

evident before the last presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019. Voters were disillusioned with most political parties, and election day turnout was low. The one candidate who attracted interest and popular support was Kais Saied, a law professor without political experience or party backing. Despite his stiff public manner, which led Tunisians to refer to him as “Robocop,” he was elected president. Saied refrained from outlining an extensive plan for political change, offering a vague vision of a decentralized democracy and a post-party future.⁷ His supporters contended that as a political outsider, he would be able to rid the country of the corruption many felt underpinned Tunisian politics.

Since assuming office, Saied has been on a collision course with the parliament, whose members accused him of exceeding his authority and undermining their position. Tunisia’s post-revolutionary constitution roughly separates the legislative and executive branches of government, delegating foreign relations and security issues to the president, and economic and domestic affairs to the parliament. The blurry boundaries between government branches have generated many disputes between them. A supreme constitutional court, intended to adjudicate constitutional disagreements, has yet to be established, as political parties disagree about suitable candidates to serve as justices. At the heart of the dispute are broader questions concerning who holds power in Tunisia and for whom the state works. Post-revolutionary Tunisia, despite structural changes, has maintained a top-down, policing approach to existing social hierarchies. While the Islamist *al-Nahda* and other parties were incorporated into an expanded political system, large segments of the population remain frustrated with a veteran political elite and new players (including al-Nahda) who acquired or maintained power and show no sign of ceding it. This includes Saied, who opposes Tunisia’s political elite, claiming to be an outsider and voice of the people, and who feel the revolution has been neutered and co-opted by that very elite.⁸

Public ire against political parties intensified, with many Tunisians accusing parties of failing to address the economic crisis, regional inequalities, and corruption. None of Tunisia’s post-revolutionary governments, for example, have been led by well-known figures in a party chosen by a large number of voters, and the large coalition governments established to promote consensus politics added to public mistrust of

⁷ Nate Grubmna and Aytug Sasmaz, “[The Collapse of Tunisia’s Party System and the Rise of Kais Saied](#),” Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), August 17, 2021.

⁸ Fadil Alriza, “[Tunisia’s Kais Saied Becomes an Ordinary Politician](#),” Middle East Institute (MEI), January 14, 2022.

political parties. It was difficult for Tunisians to identify who was truly in power.⁹ These sentiments provided Saied with fertile ground to criticize the parliament and brand its members as incompetent, corrupt, and directly responsible for Tunisia's ailments. Consequently, Saied's July 25, 2021 decision to dismiss the government, indefinitely suspend the parliament, and curb civil liberties was welcomed by many of his supporters as a necessary remedy for the country's crisis. They welcomed the appointment of a new (and weakened) government, unprecedentedly led by a woman, Najla Boudan, and continue to support the president. Saied's opponents, on the other hand, vehemently criticized him, warning that Tunisia was on a slippery slope to reinstating authoritarian rule. Tunisia's Western allies uncomfortably watched the unfolding situation, and largely remained silent as they quietly hoped the crisis would quickly subside.

A Murky Political Future

Over the past few months, the situation in Tunisia has not shown any signs of improvement, raising increasing doubts about the future of its democracy and whether its post-revolutionary achievements were merely an aberration from an otherwise entrenched authoritarian nature. Tunisia's parliament remains suspended, political life stagnant, and there is no clear path forward from the current crisis. In late March, Rashid al-Ghannouchi, speaker of Tunisia's parliament and al-Nahda's leader announced plans to hold sessions (possibly online, as the parliament remains closed off by security forces) to consider revoking Saied's moves. Saied dismissed this by asserting that "whoever wants to go back is delusional...let them meet in a spaceship."¹⁰

Tunisia's political crisis further escalated after the parliament's online session. In an expected display of defiance and opposition, members of parliament voted to repeal Saied's decrees that he used to seize power. President Saied responded by announcing that he was dissolving parliament. He accused (without elaborating) parliament members of staging a foreign supported coup and a conspiracy against state security and ordered investigations into them. Although Tunisia's constitution stipulates those elections should be held within three months of parliament's dissolution, Saied declared that he would not do so, and hold a referendum on a new constitution in July and elections next December. He further asserted that "conspirators," a reference to opposition figures, would be forbidden from running in the planned vote. The standoff between the president and parliament leaves Tunisia

⁹ Nate Grubman and Aytug Sasmaz, "[The Collapse of Tunisia's Party System and the Rise of Kais Saied](#)," Middle East Research Information Project (MERIP), August 17, 2021.

¹⁰ "[Tunisian Parliament Speaker Defies President with Planned Sessions](#)," *Reuters*, March 28, 2022.

in uncertain legal and political territory.¹¹ Following this statement, Rachid al-Ghannouchi and dozens of other parliamentarians were summoned for questioning by Tunisia's anti-terrorism police, raising the prospect of a crackdown on the opposition.¹²

One perplexing question is what exactly is president Saied's agenda? Critics have asserted that Saied lacks an economic or social program to solve the current crisis, and is merely buying time to promote his political standing.¹³ Saied has reassured concerned foreign countries that he is committed to democracy and has every intention to hold new parliamentary elections next year, following a planned referendum on constitutional reforms. Meanwhile, Saied has continued to impose measures that further weaken civil society organizations and increase state control over them, and to resort to military courts to prosecute opponents accused of "insulting the president," undermining judicial independence.¹⁴ These developments have done little to strengthen faith in Saied's pro-democracy pledges. Seeking to address public grievances about the political situation, Saied initiated an online "National Consultation" in January, inviting citizens to express their opinions about desired political reforms. This platform, however, did not attract widespread participation, with less than 10 percent of Tunisian citizens joining the online debate. Saied blamed his opponents and "fabricated" obstacles for the low turnout.¹⁵ The low number of participants may reflect technical difficulties, but it also indicates the despair and political apathy of many Tunisians. It remains to be seen if some of Tunisia's key players, such as the trade unions, civil society groups, and political movements intervene in order to draft a way out of the current malaise, and whether they have the interest and capacity to do so. As things stand now, Tunisia's "success" is sadly becoming a relic of the past.

¹¹ "[Tunisian Crisis Escalates as President Dissolves Parliament](#)," *The Guardian*, March 31, 2022; Sami Hamdi, "[Tunisia Caught between President and Parliament as Crisis Deepens](#)," *Al Jazeera*, March 31, 2022.

¹² "[Tunisia: Crisis Deepens as Opposition Leaders Summoned for Questioning](#)," *Al Jazeera*, April 1, 2022.

¹³ "Tunisia Update: Russia-Ukraine war Hits Budget," Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), March 1, 2022.

¹⁴ "Tunisia Update: Another Civilian Conviction in Military Court," Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), February 22, 2022; "Tunisia Update: Saied Vows to Halt Foreign Funding of NGOs," Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), February 24, 2022; Sheridan Cole, Amy Hawthorne, Zachary White, "[Kais Saied's Next Target in Tunisia: Civil Society](#)," Project on Middle East and Democracy (Pomed), February 24, 2022.

¹⁵ "UGTT Rules Out 'Painful Reforms'," Tunisia Update Newsletter, Project on Middle East and Democracy (POMED), March 17, 2022; "[Tunisia: Kais Saied Resolved to Organize a Referendum on July 25](#)," *Africa News*, March 21, 2022.

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