

# The American Conservative

## Tunisian Democracy is Slipping Away

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TUNIS, TUNISIA—My 26-year-old tour guide is one reason Zine El Abidine Ben Ali is no longer president of Tunisia. When protests broke out in December 2010, Hassan joined in, only to be shot in the shoulder by a government sniper. Since he could not go to a hospital, where he would be arrested, friends patched him up, leaving the bullet undisturbed. He went out the next day, he told me, and threw rocks with his other arm.

Tunisians like Hassan are at risk of losing the freedoms they gained at great cost.

Last July, President Kais Saied staged a coup against the Parliament and independent government agencies. He dismissed the prime minister and cabinet members, claimed all executive power, closed Parliament, prohibited public gatherings, arrested political opponents, and imposed travel bans. Claiming nonexistent constitutional authority, he later disbanded Parliament as well as independent judicial and electoral commissions, fired judges, and prosecuted critics. One political professional complained that Saied was “basically destroying the state.” She asked that her name not be used—one of many with whom I spoke who feared retribution from an increasingly authoritarian government.

Next, Saied plans to create *his* constitution, to be approved in a referendum on July 25, in which votes will be counted by *his* election commissioners. Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, a former minister, long-time opposition activist, and head of the Democratic Progressive Party, pointed to a “threefold crisis: political, social, and especially economic.” With protests multiplying, an increasing number of Tunisians fear what the future might hold: dictatorship, military coup, or chaos.

Democracy advocates arranged for me to visit Tunisia last month and meet with a variety of professionals and activists. Many had voted for Saied. Some initially hoped that he would live up to his promise to restore democracy. Today few credit his professed good intentions. Instead, the near-uniform diagnosis is that he plans to install an authoritarian system, perhaps akin to the personalist rule of Muammar Gaddafi, who voiced similar political ideas.

More than a decade ago, the Jasmine Revolution erupted after corrupt Tunisian police repeatedly harassed a street vendor and confiscated his goods. He burned himself alive, triggering widespread demonstrations that brought down Ben Ali's government. The Tunisian uprising sparked a succession of popular uprisings in the so-called Arab Spring. Unfortunately, nowhere else did democracy take hold.

In Tunisia, a nation of about 12 million, the people wrote a constitution, held elections, formed governments, and worked across ideological and religious lines. The moderate Islamic Ennahda Party was feared by some but eschewed extremist positions and joined coalitions with its secular counterparts. The Tunisian government supplanted increasingly authoritarian Turkey as the best example of a Muslim and Middle Eastern/North African democracy.

All was not well in Tunisia, however. Politicians bickered, governments appeared ineffective, and Tunisians didn't like what they saw. No wonder Otto von Bismarck warned against watching the making of sausages or laws. Yet Saied "played a key role in creating the crisis," noted the head of an NGO who asked not to be identified. He "actively obstructed the government," refusing to swear in cabinet members, for example.

Even more important were Tunisia's economic problems. The Jasmine Revolution began with a protest against the corrupt, dirigiste economic system. Unfortunately, little changed under the new democratic governments. Observed Chebbi, "Years later a lot of Tunisians feel that the political process didn't have the desired effect especially in terms of quality of life." The result, he added, is "a crisis of confidence with the political class and democratically elected institutions."

When Saied, a little-known law professor who had won on a populist platform, seized control, many Tunisians gave him the benefit of the doubt. Since then, noted several people I spoke with, Saied has grown both more paranoid and punitive.

When members of the Parliament met online and voted to repeal his illegal decrees, he dissolved the assembly, which he accused of staging a "coup attempt" and having "betrayed" Tunisia. In drafting a constitution he has sought to disenfranchise virtually everyone who has been active politically over the last decade. His political vision appears to involve a leader invested with all power, to be advised by diffuse, powerless local assemblies, from which regional and national representatives would be chosen, kept disorganized and leaderless by a ban on political parties. An NGO leader contended that Saied intended to "produce a very weak legislature."

Indeed, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, which underwrite dictatorships in Egypt and Bahrain and obstructed democratic forces in Libya and Sudan, are widely believed to have encouraged Saied to stage his Machtergreifung. Egypt also may have played a role. Each fears democracy as well as the emergence of even a moderate variant of political Islam. *Bloomberg* columnist Bobby Ghosh quipped: "Tunisia's

President Kais Saied may not wear military fatigues, but he's doing a pretty good Sisi impression nonetheless."

Saied initially gained support by appealing to popular frustrations. When he vowed to fix the political system, punish corruption, and address the economy, many Tunisians applauded. One Saied critic acknowledged that people had expected the new revolutionary leaders to improve their lives: "Democracy is not easy to understand when you can't feed your family." However, Chebbi believes the people have "discovered that Saied would only make matters worse." A pollster told me that Saied's support has "plummeted." Noted the *New York Times*: "The rebukes have come from staunch opponents and former allies alike, from political parties and from the media, and even from some of the same supporters who cheered in the streets when Mr. Saied froze Parliament, fired the prime minister and seized power."

Increasingly, the president is isolated and ruling alone. At the same time, noted one activist, "now we are seeing opposition parties come together," making common cause for a return to democracy. I attended a large demonstration against Saied's power grab and spoke with some of the protestors. One complained that the president "stole all the powers and put them all in one hand, his hand." She wanted to restore the constitution. Another, who voted for Saied, called the president a "usurper." Yet another complained that Saied "hasn't done anything for us."

On Saturday, police clashed with protestors who sought to march on the headquarters of the judicial council, which Saied had taken over. (Last week, he fired 57 judges.) More demonstrations are planned.

Perhaps even more significant, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the nation's largest labor union, rejected Saied's call for a "national dialogue" given his exclusion of democratic representatives; the union plans a general strike next week. Simon Speakman Cordall, a freelance journalist in Tunisia, observed: "The UGTT and its million or so members have emerged as a unique political force in the country. The UGTT spans a number of subsidiary unions, and their power, along with their ability to mobilize that power, cannot be underestimated." So far, the security agencies have obeyed Saied, but their loyalty is likely to be increasingly tested.

Tunisia's predicament prompts much gloom. One activist observed: "Tunisia is like a room full of gas. Every week it is more full of gas." Although he doesn't believe Saied will be able to establish "a real dictatorship," he fears the chaos that might ensue.

Not everyone was pessimistic, however. Rached Ghannouchi, head of the Ennahdha Party and ousted speaker of the assembly, said he was "optimistic for future." He defended the revolution: "We became a stable democracy contrary to the other failed democratic change experiments in the Arab world." He contended that Tunisians were in "one of the stages of change, one of the different phases of democratic transformation. We hope to cross this phase peacefully."

Tunisia is now in the populist phase, Ghannouchi suggested, reflecting the “very high expectations in social and economic terms” held by the people, especially by the young. He noted that Saied “won the election with a considerable majority without offering an economic program.” However, the situation has changed dramatically: “On the 25<sup>th</sup> of July from last year, the entirety of the political establishment and the media establishment were with the president. Ten months later and no one is with him anymore.”

Key to the opposition succeeding may be developing a credible program for economic and political reform. One activist contended that support for Saied “is dwindling” because “He shows no interest in solving people’s problems.” However, in Tunisia, like America, it is hard to beat something with nothing. Chebbi emphasized the need for a genuine national dialogue to “build consensus,” a lawful political process, and early elections. “Tunisians have a right to arbitrate this crisis through democratic tools,” namely the ballot box.

What should the U.S. do?

Despite the Biden administration’s rhetorical support for democracy, its stance toward Saied has been remarkably weak. Originally Washington issued generic statements applicable to both sides, for instance, stating that “Tunisia must not squander its democratic gains” and calling on Saied “to adhere to the principles of democracy and human rights.” In December, Washington welcomed “President Saied’s announcement of a timeline outlining a path for political reform and parliamentary elections and look[ed] forward to a reform process that is transparent and inclusive of diverse political and civil society voices.” However, the administration appears to be finally losing patience, and last month proposed cutting economic and military aid almost in half next year.

U.S. policymakers should recognize the limits of their influence. Given Saied’s refusal to divert from his authoritarian course despite growing domestic opposition, he isn’t likely to buckle under U.S. pressure. Indeed, he might head to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to beg for handouts, following the example of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi after a similar partial cut-off of American aid.

Nevertheless, it is important for Washington to refuse to give its imprimatur for a regime that is growing more autocratic. Most Tunisian activists I spoke with hope for stronger opposition to Saied’s dictatorial course.

What the Biden administration should do is use its bully pulpit to call for restoration of democracy—reviving government institutions, respecting civil liberties and press freedom, undertaking a genuine national dialogue, engaging in an inclusive constitutional rewrite, followed by free votes to ratify the constitution and elect a new president and legislature. The Pentagon should encourage the Tunisian armed forces to respect the constitution rather than the constitutional usurper.

Washington should coordinate with Europe, which has greater historic, cultural, and economic ties with Tunisia. Washington should consider applying Magnitsky Act sanctions against Saied, his top officials, and government institutions. The threat might prove particularly effective against those who opportunistically supported Saied, only to see him hemorrhage public and foreign support.

Finally, the U.S. should end all financial assistance to Tunisia. Admittedly, that's a controversial proposal. Opposition activists disagree on the issue, with some worrying about triggering economic collapse. However, it would be worse for the U.S. to keep an emerging dictatorship afloat and subsidize a return to Tunisia's oppressive past.

The Arab Spring loosed enormous optimism and hope. Tragically, in every case but Tunisia, the result was negative. And now, Tunisian democracy appears to be slipping away.

Still, hope remains. One activist said that in the end she didn't think the "Tunisian people will accept dictatorship ten years" after the revolution.

More than decade ago, the Tunisian people risked much to free themselves after decades of oppression. They will have to take a similar stand today to preserve the freedoms that they won in the Jasmine Revolution. People of good will in America and around the world should stand with them.

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