

# KAIS SAIED TODAY, WHAT TOMORROW?

Tunisia in the Age of Hyperpolitics

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# Key findings

1. Unlike many peers in autocracy, the regime of Kais Saied demonstrates little interest in engendering legitimacy through economic performance. The President's approach to economic governance has alternated between indifference and incoherence. The results have been to deepen preexisting structural issues while introducing new, acute problems such as hard currency scarcity and shortages of basic goods.
2. Saied's method for consolidating power has leaned heavily upon repression, the closing of independent institutional spaces, and the weaponization of the law. Contrarily, it has neglected the tools typically leveraged by successful rightwing populists: Namely, mass organizing, elite co-option, targeted welfarism, and the building of a growth coalition.
3. In setting Saied in comparative context, his regime more resembles those of volatile populist contemporaries like Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil than those of long-ruling alternatives like Viktor Orban or Hungary or Recep Erdogan of Turkey.
4. Though an evaluation of social, political, and economic conditions in Tunisia today suggests the President's grip on power may not be as strong as first appears, that should not be interpreted to imply that democracy's prospects are ascending.
5. Popular resentment of Tunisia's political parties and of the leading figures of the post-2011 transition remains intense. Popular support for representative institutions and for the very idea of interest intermediation remains weak. Both these facts of political life are explained by a host of factors. These include restraints on sovereignty imposed by the global economy; socioeconomic, technological, and ideational changes impacting not just Tunisia but the world around it; and the marked failures of the political classes during the post-2011 period.
6. The possibility of popular forces mobilizing to topple Kais Saied should not be diminished, though the odds are lessened by the military's increasing politicization.
7. In the event that Saied is removed from Carthage, the citizenry's lack of faith in representative institutions will make reconstructing a democracy an exceedingly arduous task.
8. For those in Tunisia and the international community still looking to support democracy in Tunisia, it is essential that the focus not be reduced to opposing Kais Saied. Just as important are efforts to alter the social and economic conditions which determine what is politically possible.



# Executive Summary

This report from the Noria Research MENA Program offers a consideration of the political moment in Tunisia. It begins by probing the character and prospects of the autocracy which has consolidated around the person of Kais Saied since 2021. From there, it proceeds to evaluate the possibility of democracy's restoration.

Research findings are many. By way of fieldwork and historical and comparative analysis, we determine that the autocracy of Kais Saied is unconventional in two significant ways. Firstly, it exhibits indifference to both performance and ideology-based legitimacy. Secondly, it foregoes meaningful attempts at “organizing certainty”: Straying from the autocratic mold, the Saied regime devotes few resources to building institutions for rationalizing the management of intra-elite disputes, co-opting and disciplining potential rivals, gathering information on the public, or tethering different social groups to the state. In view of these unconventional properties and of the regime's weak performance across three domains critical to the longevity of rightwing populists—principally, mass organizing, stewarding a growth coalition, and deploying targeted welfare—the report's author posits that Saied's staying power, having grown increasingly reliant upon repression, may be limited.

While that sounds an optimistic note, research findings also suggest that the likelihood of a revived democracy in the short to medium-term is slim. This prognostication is informed by the public's resentment of political parties and distrust of representative institutions. These facts of contemporary political life—the causes of which are traced to historical processes specific and non-specific to Tunisia—lowers democracy's chances in two ways: (i) They reduce the probability that popular forces will galvanize behind an opposition movement hitherto steered by the transition's leading partisans and (ii) In the eventuality that Saied is dislodged, they make the consolidation of democratic rule exceedingly difficult to execute.

The report concludes with a brief discussion of policy recommendations for the international community. As the author makes plain, neither condemning nor opposing Kais Saied will be sufficient to return Tunisia to democracy. Rather, steps must also be taken to address the conditions which make the building of strong relations between political parties and social groups—without which a healthy democracy cannot exist—possible. Critical here are debt relief and other measures to extend the economic policy space.

# 1.

# Introduction

Tunisia, as refashioned since the self-coup of Kais Saied in July 2021, is a land laden with contradictions. Autocracy again prevails, though a version unmoved by that system of government's defining principle-cum-objective: the organization of certainty. The Tunisian President possesses a populist self-regard, though demonstrates indifference to the public's welfare and little interest in harnessing or engaging the people. The country is home to a citizenry attached to hard-earned liberties, though one largely nonplussed by the repression of democratically elected leaders past. Faith in the street—in unorganized comings together and the kinetic force of protesting voices raised as one—endures, though faith in representative and intermediating institutions is nil.

How are these contradictions best understood? What might they mean for Tunisia's present? For its future? What, if anything, do they express about our shared historical moment?

Orienting the answers put forth in this report is Anton Jager's concept of hyperpolitics. Derived from changes observed in western societies in the aftermath of the long 1990s, Jager uses hyperpolitics as a shorthand and explanation for the frenetic, non-institutionalized modes of action that have emerged as the dominant form of mass political expression in these parts of world: to make sense of both parties and parliaments in crisis and the unceasing popular uprisings which now come and go "like a neutro bomb that shakes the people in the frame but leaves all the infrastructure intact."<sup>[1]</sup>

As will be made apparent, Jager's concept is one well up for travel to the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, in Tunisia's case, we will argue it can serve as a skeleton key for the transitional democracy's failings, the lack of institutionalization and interest intermediation in Kais Saied's autocracy, and for democracy's poor chances going forward.

Organizationally, our report is structured as follows. We begin with an appraisal of the current ruling regime. Putting Kais Saied into conversation with relevant comparators from the worlds of autocracy and rightwing populism, this appraisal determines the constitutive properties of Saiedism and, in view of these properties, proposes that the prospects of the President's rule are limited. From there, we proceed to consider the state of mass politics. Here, attentions focus upon social, economic, and technological processes operating at the local and global level as they connect to patterns of popular perception, understanding and behavior. Causal linkages are established between the processes in question and social atomization, the public's alienation from representative institutions, and the rise of a moralized obsession with corruption. In conjunction with more contingent developments, we identify these facts of contemporary political life as the structural drivers of events over the past twelve years, and prognosticate on what their enduring salience means for the years ahead. The report then closes with a brief conclusion, where policy recommendations are tentatively put forth.

■ [1] See: Anton Jager, "Everything is hyperpolitical: A genealogy of the present", *The Point*, 29, February 2023.

# 2.

# Saiedism in Review

## The autocracy of Kais Saied defies convention.

Diverging from paths laid in the Gulf and parts of East Asia, Saied's project pays little mind to performance-based legitimacy. Nowhere is this attested more plainly than in the apathy Carthage demonstrates in the face of overlapping social and developmental crises. Upticks in suicide, drug use<sup>[2]</sup>, attempted sea crossings and youth mental illness garner but passing mention. Empty shelves, stagnating wages, and industrial backsliding prompt only vague allusions to hoarding and compradorist betrayal. Austerity is administered and millions of dinars funneled to the country's wealthiest via public borrowing and unreformed tax code welfarism, championing of social justice notwithstanding. And in 2022-2023, when the walls truly began closing in, a President with the authority to govern by edict opted for paralysis, ceding the floor to a crew of uninspired technocrats just to undermine any plan they came up with. If many-an-autocracy propositions its citizenry with the trade of welfare for political agency, clearly, Tunisia's is not one.

### SYMPTOMS OF SOCIAL FAILURE

#### Risking death on the Med

Since 2020, the number of attempted Sea Crossings from Tunisian territory has steadily increased. Crossings spiked in 2023: In the first three months of the year, **1885** persons made it to Italy from Tunisian shores while an additional **14,963** were intercepted in attempting to. These figures represent **100%** and **400%** increases, respectively, on those of 2022.

#### Mental health Crisis

The Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux documented 45 suicide attempts during the first three months of 2023, **1/3** of which were by **self-immolation**. The number of attempts represents a **25%** increase as compared to 2022. A groundbreaking report from International Alert, meanwhile, centered on 18-29 year-olds from working class areas in El Kabaria, Kasserine, and Tataouine, **showed a significant majority suffering from anxiety, 28% suffering from depression, and a large majority thinking frequently of migrating**. When asked for the primary cause of their distress, **uncertainty about the future was identified by more** than four of every five research participants.

#### Joblessness

According to the government's official statistics, the unemployment rate since Kais Saied's coup has fluctuated between **15.6** and **17.9%**. Accounting for a labor force participation rate of less than **50%**, this means a little more than **40%** of the working age population has a job. Insofar as **43.9%** of the employed are employed informally, these are indicators of a labor market in deep distress.

Data provided by the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux, the National Institute of Statistics, International Alert, and the World Bank

[2] According to the Ministry of Education, drug abuse rates amongst high school students in Tunisia is 9.2%. Alcohol abuse is also high. See: Editorial Board, "Tunisia—Hatem Ben Salem: 9% of Tunisian students use drugs", Tunisie Numérique, December 19, 2019.



At the same time and here breaking from the molds of 20th century archetypes, Tunisia's new autocracy evinces scant interest in engendering consent through ideology. Which is not to say that Saied forsakes ideological appeal altogether. His utopian conservatism is pronounced and endearing to a milieu of non-lkhwan traditionalists.[3] His pantomiming of third worldism—replete with references to economic sovereignty and a theatrical defiance of the IMF—finds purchase amongst youth and large sections of the left.[4] His endorsement of Sofien Ben Sghaier's take on "great replacement" theory earns plaudits from those inclined to see the causes of contemporary ills in a society's most vulnerable. It wins support from some in the senior ranks of the military (retired Admiral Kamel Akrouf none the least[5]) and from the desperate leaders of Europe as well[6]: It was, after all, mere days after remedial action was taken against the migration chimera—principally, the forcible transfer of more than a thousand black Africans to desert lands within touching distance of Algeria and Libya—that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni came to Tunis to announce the expediting of a 1€ billion aid package.[7]

And then there is Saied's self-anointment as vigilante and high priest of the anti-corruption struggle. If not as inspiring as it once was (there is attrition in pledging to bring the book down on hundreds of allegedly guilty parties while never doing so[8]), the anti-corruption discourse continues to curry some favor for the President, as do his promises of a revolution restored through direct democracy. Seen together, this "archipelago of texts and personalities", to borrow a phrase from Tocqueville, undeniably furnishes a vision, however hallucinatory, of the way the world is and ought to be. And in tapping different veins of popular sentiment, it is the case that such forays into ideology contributed not only to Saied's rise, but to the opposition's failures to unite or win back the body politic thereafter.

That can all be true, however, without changing the fact that Saied and his allies exhibit none of the ambition and wherewithal needed to construct a (counter)revolutionary subject. Socialization initiatives, to the extent they can be called that, are today restricted to pro forma cyber activism and the proselytizing of al-mouassissoun, a movement of devotees that helped engineer Saied's ascendance but that lost rather than gained energy upon its talisman's coming to power.[9] Regime messaging, meanwhile, leans on meandering speechmaking delivered in a language, classical Arabic, that the vast majority of the Tunisian populace cannot understand.[10] Saied apologists in the media are, of course, many, and their work in disseminating his ideological frames not to be diminished. Those who might present an alternative are also finding less and less space where they can make their case: The turning of the calendar to 2023 saw opposition figures (journalists included) arrested with increasing verve, and restrictions on expression—none more chilling than Decree Law 2022-54, nominally meant to combat the spread of "fake news"—are very much in effect.

- [3] Barrett Limoges, "Kais Saied, the conservative 'utopian' leading Tunisia's electoral revolt", *Middle East Eye*, September 18, 2019.
  - [4] International Crisis Group, "La Tunisie de Saied: privilégier le dialogue et redresser l'économie", *Rapport Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord*, 232, April 2022.
  - [5] Kamel Akrouf, "Du risque d'une migration incontrôlée", *Études Marines: La Méditerranée*, 23, Centre d'études stratégiques de la marine, May 2023.
  - [6] Monica Marks, "Tunisia's President gives life to a Zionism conspiracy theory", *New Lines Magazine*, March 21, 2023.
  - [7] See: Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: no safe haven for black African migrants, refugees", Report, July 19, 2023.
  - [8] Note that most of Saied's rather absurd claims on corruption come from a report published in 2011 by La Commission Nationale d'Investigation sur la Corruption et la Malversation. The Commission was overseen by Saied's mentor and long-time Ben Ali apologist Abdelfattah Amor, and names four-hundred and sixty businessmen as having accumulated more than \$10 billion in ill-begotten gains.
  - [9] On the origins of al-mouassissoun, see: Khadija Mohsen-Finan, "Kais Saied, Tunisia's all-powerful President", *Orient XXI*, February 8, 2022.
  - On Saied's cyber activists, see: Habib Lassoued, "How social media helped Kais Saied beat the competition", *The Arab Weekly*, September 9, 2019.
  - [10] See: Haïfa Souilmi, "A tale of two exceptions: everyday politics of democratic backsliding in Tunisia", *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2023.
- As Ms. Souilmi notes, even though many listeners cannot understand Saied's classical Arabic, a considerable number still attest that the speeches enhance their view of the President.

With political fatigue pushing profit-minded news organizations to foreground the circus of sport and entertainment and social media becoming a vector for police harassment, even technologies for ideological contestation have become inhospitable.[11] Still, the picture painted is ultimately one of a President more able to negate than to create. Whispers in the spring of 2023 about a revived Ministry of Information could augur change on this front.[12] Until this comes to pass, though, Saied et al can hardly be said capable of embedding their jambalaya of grievance, explanation and answer in the collective consciousness: The public's abstention from those forums meant to instantiate the President's government of the people—the online consultation concerning the new constitution; the subsequent referendum on that constitution; the two rounds of elections for the *Assemblée des représentants du peuple* held in the winter of 2022-2023—show as much.

## Saied's Crackdown on Expression

The Saied regime has targeted journalists with increasing verve in recent times. During the first six months of 2023, the regime leveraged security and counter-terrorism legislation in addition to *Décret-loi* on cybercrimes to arrest and bring charges against six journalists. Since 2021, the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has documented twenty-one cases of human rights violations against journalists. Journalistic access to government business has also become restricted. In June, the press was banned from covering the committee meetings of the new *Assemblée des représentants du peuple*. A judicial ruling in June 2023, meanwhile, banned the press from covering the trials of the two dozen political opponents that the regime is currently bringing charges of "conspiracy against state security affairs" against.

Looking forward, it looks like the regime may be readying the ground for a comprehensive regulation of expression. The issuing of the aforementioned *Décret-Loi* on cybercrimes is critical in these regards. Announced in September 2022, *Décret-Loi 54* makes the propagation of "fake news" a criminal offense. Insofar as what constitutes fake news is subject to the authorities' interpretation, the *Décret-Loi* has equipped Carthage with a highly malleable tool for policing expression.

## A legal scholar's approach to autocracy

Just as disregard for matters of legitimacy render Tunisian autocracy an odd fit for existing typologies, so too does the President's approach to the institutionalization of his power. Ruling more or less by fiat, Saied's approach has followed from a legalistic and literalist interpretation of the Bourguiban adage "Which system? I am the system!" Indeed, all sites of government previously independent of the office of the Presidency have been either shuttered or commandeered over the past two-odd years. The parliament of 2019 was frozen on July 25th, 2021 and then dissolved in March of 2022. Legal ambiguities on the military chain-of-command were resolved with Saied's self-appointment as Supreme Commander in May 2021. The autonomy of the judiciary and its personnel was ended in a number of harsh maneuvers executed in 2022. And ombudsmen institutions like the Tunisian Anti-Corruption Agency (INLUCC) were closed down or allowed to expire.

■ [11] Rihab Boukhatia, "Chaines TV Tunisiennes : Dépolitisation en marche", *Nawaat*, March 28, 2023.  
[12] Africa Intelligence, "Kais Saied mulls reviving information ministry", *Report*, April 24, 2023.

In also exploiting legislative failures of the recent and distant past and delineating the constitutional parameters for a state of emergency in open-ended language, the Tunisian Presidency was thereby turned into a Schmittian sovereign par excellence.[13] For all effects and purposes, Saied now is the law and that which is above the law. The state, for that matter, has been refashioned an administrative instrument of his power. This was only reaffirmed upon the conjuring of new, nominally representative legislative and municipal bodies in 2023. The new lower house of the parliament—the aforementioned *Assemblée des représentants du peuple*—has been, by dint of Saied’s unilateral rewriting of electoral law in September 2022, preempted from hosting an organized opposition.[14] (The Presidency’s takeover of the Independent High Authority for Elections, or ISIE, further ensures this). The soon-to-be-seated upper house and its feeder bodies, the local councils, meanwhile, have similarly been designed to obstruct the cohering of dissent.

## Tunisia’s New Parliamentary System

The docility of the lower house of parliament was engineered through Saied’s rewriting of electoral law in September 2022. In substance, the President’s revisions did away with list voting and party-based proportional representation (the D’Hondt method), campaign finance and candidacy eligibility rules—public funding for campaigns has ceased and any person who has ever been charged with a legal violation is disqualified from running for office—, and allow representatives to be impeached if ten constituents withdraw their confidence. In effect, this made political parties a legislative irrelevance and the lower house a rubber stamp body populated by those predisposed against independent action (it hardly takes much organizing, after all, to whip the ten voters need to remove someone from office). The effects of this transformation are observable in the current composition and leadership of the *Assemblée des représentants du peuple*. The session voted in by 11.4% of the electorate at the end of January 2023 is older and more male than its predecessors, with the largest bloc of deputies a coalition of former Nidaa Tounes party members united by opportunism as much as their unwillingness to buck Carthage. Perched immediately below them is an alignment of pro-Saied leftists[15] while the chamber’s sitting president—the aging lawyer Ibrahim Bouderbala—is nothing if not a loyal servant to power.[16]

The soon-to-be-seated upper house of the parliament (the *Assemblée nationale des régions et des districts*, ANRD) and its feeder bodies, the local councils should not be expected to host meaningful deliberation or dissent either. In design, these bodies were inspired from Saied’s affinities for the Grand Council of the late colonial period. The obscure arrangements through which the upper house is to be populated suggest its use will be as a loyalist counterweight to the lower house in the unlikely event the latter takes a turn for recalcitrance. The combination of redrawn district lines and oversight powers granted to state-appointed officials, meanwhile, point to the local councils becoming vectors for clientelism.[17]

■ [13] Article 8 of 1957’s Code of Military Justice; Law 26 of 2015 on Counter-terrorism and Preventing Money Laundering; and Articles 67, 71, and 128 of the Penal Code are especially key in these regards.

[14] See: Sarah Yerkes and Mohammad al-Mailam, “Tunisia’s new electoral law is another blow to democratic progress”, *Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 11, 2022.

[15] *Alliance pour la Sécurité et les Libertés*, “600 jours après l’article 80 : de l’état d’exception à l’instauration de l’autocratie”, *Report*, 2023.

[16] Frida Dahmani, “Dix choses à savoir sur Brahim Bouderbala, le président de la nouvelle Assemblée tunisienne”, *Jeune Afrique*, March 16, 2023.

[17] Mahdi Elleuch, “Saied completes “bottom-up construction” on the rubble of democracy and decentralization”, *The Legal Agenda*, April 26, 2023.

## Autocracy without politics

While the breadth of institutional change just sketched is striking, one of the things that stands out in Saied's approach to institutionalization—and one of the things that again sets him apart—is his relative disregard for politics. Sure, there are schemes with the local councils to account for, as well as Saied's criminalization of dissent and incarceration of the opposition: All that is very political. At the same time, Saied shows marked disinterest when it comes to creating or commandeering the kinds of institutions which autocrats have historically leaned upon for elite cooptation, resolving disputes amongst coalition members, gathering information on the citizenry, and tethering different social groups to the state.

This disinterest can be attributed to Saied's ideological mistrust of intermediation and the particular disdain he cultivated for the representative institutions of the post-2011 period. Animated by these impulses, Saied has, to date, refused to create his own political party, to formally associate with an existing party, or to vest any other organizational weapon with the kinds of resources required to serve either elite or mass-oriented political functions.

He has also shunned other available channels for institutionally embedding his regime amongst elite and popular networks. Despite occasionally meeting with the head of the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Agriculture (UTICA), Saied has observably weakened the formal and informal sinews previously connecting the state with the most influential fractions of capital. In addition, the President has corroded the corporatist arrangements which had, since the departure of Ben Ali, brought governors, business and organized labor into semi-regular alignment. In snubbing the proposals which the trade union federation (UGTT) and its partners in civil society—principally, the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (ONAT), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) and the Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights (FTDES)—put forth for setting up a new deliberative body to reset the post-2021 course, Saied opted against opening up a new forum for politicking, too. The upshot has been to retrofit the Tunisian polity as an institutional vacuum. Think Libyan *jamahiriya* without the adhesives of tribalism or oil receipts;

Naturally, the effects of all this are diverse and far-reaching. They are perhaps most immediately evinced in the President's failures to extend his circle of senior advisors beyond the narrow circle of friends who he rode with into Carthage in 2019: Ridha Chiheb Mekki, Sonia Charbti, Charbti's husband (and current Minister of Interior) Kamel Fekhi, and Saied's brother Naoufel remain on their perches, with no stakeholders connected to an independent social base having been brought into the mix. Efforts at midwifing a new securitized political elite, meanwhile, may be ongoing—as reflected in Saied's frequent appointment of military officers to the cabinet and governorships<sup>[18]</sup>—though proceed without systematic planning.

The institutional vacuum of Saied's own making can also speak to the regime's struggles in incorporating potential rivals and maintaining elite cohesion. On the first score, a success like the elevation of former UGTT executive bureau member Mohamed Ali Boughdiri to the post of Education Minister in January—a man locked into a longstanding feud with UGTT Secretary General Nouredine Taboubi—should be acknowledged. So too should Saied's plans to raise allies within the *tansiqiyyat*—the coordination committees which proliferated in 2020 and which primarily acted to secure jobs for the young men directing them<sup>[19]</sup>—to positions of power within the National Assembly for Regions and Provinces and the local councils.<sup>[20]</sup> Ultimately, however, these are the kind of exceptions which prove the rule of generalized flecklessness.

■ [18] Africa Intelligence, "Kais Saied fills his regime's top posts with military men", Report, February 17, 2023.

[19] Khaled Hedoui, "Coordination committees' overshadow parties, unions in Tunisia", *The Arab Weekly*, May 5, 2020.

[20] Author personal correspondence, Tunis, June 2023.

## Elite breakdown

That same fecklessness abides, moreover, when it comes to keeping elites together. Evidence in these regards is rather abundant. There are the firings and resignations which regularly deplete the roster of the President's trusted lieutenants (see: Othman Jerandi, Taoufik Charfeddine, and Nadia Akacha, to name just three prominent examples). There is the turnover which has destabilized the economic policy community: In 2023 alone, Minister of Industry, Energy, and Mines Neila Gongi and Minister of Trade and Export Development Fadila al Rabhi were dismissed from their posts while top economic advisor Hassan Bedhief quietly left his job, Central Bank Governor Marouane Abassi was threatened, and Minister of Economy and Planning Samir Saied was subjected to regular public humiliations.

There are the defections witnessed during the shambolic constitution rewriting process: Even Sadok Belaid, handpicked by Saied to oversee his National Constitutive Committee for the New Republic after previously assisting with the intellectual laundering of the President's July 2021 coup, would denounce the constitutional draft the President went forward with.[21] And there is of course the grand businessmen's gathering unease with the state of things, which one need only consult Tunisia's financial press to observe.

Saied's creation of an institutional vacuum has undermined his regime's faculties in tending to political alliances, too. In these regards, there is perhaps no more instructive example than that of the President's relations with the pan-Arabist left. Where once ranking amongst his most committed backers, frustrations and disagreements over the President's constitutional obsessions provoked the fracturing of the Watad Party and its boycotting of the referendum held on July 25th.[22] Embarrassed by the population's growing disenchantment and angered by the technocrats he filled his government with[23], the scions of the Mouvement Echaab and Harak 25-Juillet also began taking some distance from the President last winter.[24] With Abderazak Khallouli's abrupt resignation from his post as President of the political bureau and the departure of spokesman Mahmoud ben Mabrouk in May, Harak 25-Juillet have since imploded.[25] In addition, insofar as it was Saied's ponderous and incoherent governance which forced the UGTT's national leadership into adopting a more confrontational posture at the start of this year, it is apparent that Saied's refusal to build institutions has also contributed to the breakdown of his détente with non-partisan players.

Finally, there are the impacts of anti-institutionalization on the regime's connections to the population at large. Apart from the rather pathetic online consultation that was included in the constitution rewriting process, Saied's anti-intermediation posture has led to there being no mechanism for putting his project in regular interface with the people. With no field offices or other spaces for participating in his "bottom-up democracy" and the local councils looking destined to become hollowed out vehicles of clientelism, it would therefore be no exaggeration to say that Saied and his regime have no substantive presence in society, their sole bridgehead being that of the state itself.

- [21] See: Frida Dahmani, "Tunisie: ce qu'il faut savoir sur Sadok Belaid, président de la commission pour la nouvelle République", *Jeune Afrique*, June 22, 2022.
- Editorial Board, "Nouvelle constitution en Tunisie : Sadok Belaid clashe avec Kais Saied", *Middle East Eye*, July 4, 2022.
- [22] Editorial Board, "Watad : Un parti, deux congrès, deux SG et deux instances dirigeantes", *Espace Manager*, May 1, 2023.
- Editorial Board, "Tunisie : Le parti al Watad annonce qu'il boycottera le référendum du 25 juillet", *Kapitalis*, July 18, 2022.
- [23] Editorial Board, "Tunisie : Le Harak du 25 juillet appelle à 'assainir' l'administration", *Agence Tunis Afrique Press*, May 24, 2023.
- [24] See: Abdelkrim Dermerch, "Paysage politique : le mouvement Echaab se rebiffe...", *La Presse.tn*, December 23, 2022.
- [25] Editorial staff, "Abderazak Khallouli démissionne du bureau politique de Harak 25-Juillet", *Business News*, May 26, 2023.
- [26] For more on this history, see: Anne Wolf, *Ben Ali's Tunisia: Power and Contention in an Authoritarian Regime*, Oxford University Press, 2023, p.3.

## Tunisia's autocrats past and present

To appreciate the strangeness of Kais Saied's approach to institutionalization, one need only remember the method of Tunisia's last autocrat: Zine al Abidine Ben Ali. As documented in Anne Wolf's recent book *Ben Ali's Tunisia: Power and Contention in an Authoritarian Regime*, one of the first things Ben Ali did after executing his coup against Habib Bourguiba was set about a gradual though purposeful takeover of the Democratic Constitutional Rally party (RCD). With time, he would leverage changes in protocols with a series of ideological interventions to displace an old guard of party doyens, facilitate the rise of persons personally and politically tied to his own fate, and grow the party's role as an arbitrator of everyday social issues. It is certainly the case that Ben Ali's RCD lost significant traction with party apparatchiks and the public by the late 2000s. Still, the party endured until the end as an organizational tool for engaging, surveilling, and ordering society: At the moment the uprisings of 2010-2011 kicked off, a resounding 39.1% of those living in Sidi Bouzid, one of the true crucibles of the revolution, were registered party members.[26] No more stark, then, could the contrast in organizational presence vis-a-vis the Saied regime be.

All this is rather confounding. On the one hand, the Saied's regime engages in neither the horizontal outreach nor the vertical organizing that are the bread and butter of stable government, regardless of political system. On the other, it operates in a manner that appears antithetical to the defining principles and praxes of autocracy. As Johannes Gerschewski has argued, just as democracy can be understood as a system of organized uncertainty, autocracies can be identified by their ceaseless striving for the opposite, by attempts at cultivating and preserving an "organized certainty." Typically, this is pursued through efforts meant to stabilize every potential weak point, cover every contingency, know where any actor stands at given moment, and to shape incentives and restraints so as to make obedience the expectation.[27]

As our brief review attests, however, such efforts are few and far between in Saied's Tunisia. Yes, the repression of dissent, policing of the public sphere, and legal construction of a super Presidency enhances the certainty of the regime's persistence to a degree. Nevertheless, Saied's irrationalism, penchant for ad-hoc decision making, and resistance to institutionalized politics means that uncertainty has in fact become the defining attribute of his rule.[28]

## Seeking clarity within a different logic: Saied's populism in comparative perspective

If eccentricities in institutionalization, like disregard for both performative and ideological legitimacy, make Tunisia's current regime a square peg for the round hole of autocracy, how, then, to make sense of Saied's project?

■ [27] Johannes Gerschewski, *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

[28] On Saied's improvisatorial approach, see: Nidhal Mekki, "From 'big plans' to improvisation: where is the new Tunisian constituent process headed?", *ConstitutionNet*, April 29, 2022.

More purchase on the nature and prospects of Carthage's current steward can perhaps be gained through putting Saied and his regime in conversation with a second political phenomenon: that of contemporary rightwing populism. That Saied qualifies as an expression of this phenomenon is difficult to dispute: he identifies as a populist, luxuriates in populism's dichotomous construction of an elite versus the people, and famously considers himself the people incarnate, as an expansive literature now documents.[29] Like other rightwing populists, Saied also rose to power through democratic means and as such, must continue to couch his claim to govern within democratic references—a variable that differentiates the Tunisian President from some of the autocratic regimes discussed earlier and one that informs why explorations into autocracy yield less insight into Saied's rule than would be expected. This all being the case, it holds that by comparing Saied with other rightwing populists, patterns and tendencies might be identified which can better speak to the character and outlook of his regime.

## Pillars of contemporary right-wing populism

In surveying the scene of contemporary rightwing populism, successful iterations—as determined by longevity of rule—can be recognized as sharing in a number of core features. One is aptitude in mass organizing. Take Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the AK Party, for instance. Never decoupled from the mass movement which powered its rise, Erdoganism has—through its official and unofficial organs—shown itself repeatedly capable of galvanizing a winning electoral bloc, yes, but also of rallying a street presence and even mobilizing paramilitary forces during moments of existential crisis.[30] Though their capacities not quite as well-honed, Viktor Orban and his Fidesz Party, another flag bearer for high-achieving rightwing populism, also evince obvious strengths in mass organizing: coordinating under the umbrella of the Civil Cooperation Forum, Orban et al have asserted themselves into the lifeworlds of hundreds of thousands of Christian conservatives, established recurring dominance at the ballot box, and turned out bodies for protests in the tens and hundreds of thousands.[31]

The second feature shared by top-of-the-class rightwing populists is purposefulness (if not always acumen) in stitching together a growth coalition. In Budapest, Orban nationalized a great many of the industries which served the local market—prominently including firms in the banking, energy, mass transportation, and telecommunications sectors—and then redistributed the assets acquired to cultivate a class of loyalist businessmen.[32]

With this political flank secured, he and his party then tended to the country's developmental needs by adopting a conciliatory approach to the multinational corporations (principally, automobile manufacturers) responsible for Hungary's export income. In Ankara, the early years of Erdoganism saw the nurturing of a new generation of Anatolian manufacturers which might rival the secularist fraction of capital based in Istanbul and along the Aegean coastline.

■ [29] See, amongst other works: Hatem Nefii, *Tunisie : vers un populisme autoritaire?*, Riveneuve 2022; Malel Lakhali, "The ghost people and populism from above: the Kais Saied case", *Commentary*, Arab Reform Initiative, March 23, 2022.

[30] See: Cihan Tugal, "The strengths and limits of neoliberal populism: the statism and mass organisation of contemporary rightwing regimes", *Contemporary Politics*, 2023, pp. 9-12.

[31] Bela Greskovits, "Rebuilding the Hungarian right through civil organization and contention: the civic circles movement", *Working Paper*, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 2017.

[32] See: Mitchell Orenstein and Bojan Bugarcic, "Work, family, fatherland: the political economy of populism in central and eastern Europe", 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series, LSE, 163, December 2020; Katherina Bluhm and Mihai Varga, "Conservative developmental statism in east central Europe", *New Political Economy*, 4, 2020.

[33] Malihe Razazan and Mira Nabulsi, "Interview with Cihan Tugal", *Podcast: Voices of the Middle East and North Africa*, April 2023.

Thereafter, Erdogan and his allies increasingly turned to statist measures—first through credit policy (interventions made possible by the takeover of the central bank) and later through the formation of a sovereign wealth fund and direct state investment in the built environment—to juice growth. Erdogan’s efforts ended in ignominy, of course, as was revealed in the Turkish lira’s collapse as much as in the tragic events of February 2023, where shoddy construction and a profit-minded deregulation of building codes came undone under the stress of an earthquake.[33] Despite the horrors afflicted, however, Erdogan’s piecing together of a growth coalition by hook and crook would, like Orban’s efforts, continue to pay political dividends, as the elections of spring 2023 resoundingly displayed. While ultimately leading the country to the precipice of a Lebanon-style implosion, even the regime of Abdel Fatah el-Sisi demonstrated intentionality in suturing together a growth coalition: Leveraging credit lines furnished by foreign lenders and domestic savers alike, Egypt’s generalissimos’ funneled billions into the pockets of military enterprises—the fraction of capital most privileged by the regime—and western and Chinese contractors and, for a time, sustained economic expansion.[34]

The third and final feature held in common by the leading lights of rightwing populism is a deftness with targeted welfarism. In many contexts, targeting follows a nativist and/or chauvinistic compass. Denmark’s People’s Party leverages the exclusion of refugees and migrants from state benefits to win itself some support amongst a precarious fraction of the lower classes.[35] The workfarist policies of Orban, meanwhile, restrict benefits to job-holding families: In excluding single mothers, the unemployed, and other vulnerable populations, this choice allows the Fidesz to play up its family values conservatism and as such, to shore up its base.[36] In other contexts, welfare targeting abides by religious albeit no less politically-laden logics. Throughout Erdogan’s two-decade-long reign, he and his party steadily dismantled the social security system which had previously furnished members of the formalized labor force with different forms of insurance, thereby punishing a social group perceived to be of secularist and leftist persuasions. At the same time, Erdoganism’s funded and expanded aid operations carried out by Islamic civil society organizations like the Humanitarian Relief Fund, organizations whose services privileged the informal poor and created a bridgehead for the AK Party amongst them. Indiscriminate of form, then, an arrow in the quiver of rightwing populists targeted welfarism is.

## Saied’s tinpot populism

Having appraised the project of Kais Saied, it should be clear he is cut from a different cloth than that of the twenty-first century’s high-achieving populists. In terms of mass organization, the President’s footprint is light. A connection, ideational or otherwise, to those who have brutalized black Africans in Sfax and further afield does exist. Direct contact with members of the aforementioned *tansiqiyyat* is also regular.[37] Nevertheless, neither these initiatives nor any other could be said to encapsulate the mass part of mass organizing. Insofar as the organizing itself is also short on rationalization and routinization, it can be concluded that Saied’s efforts on this front are of a qualitatively lesser sort than those of Erdogan et al.

Saied’s commitments to and capacity in configuring a growth coalition fail to meet the mark of rightwing populism’s best and brightest, too. The reduction of standard corporate tax rates to 15% in 2022 might appear an attempt at seducing the business classes, though in a context where the state has long since acquiesced to tax avoidance, it offered enticements more nominal than real.

[34] See: Colin Powers, “Paving a road to perdition: Abdel Fatah el-Sisi and the drivers of Egypt’s economic ruin”, Report, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, August 2023.

[35] Christian Lyhne Ibsen, “Business responses to populism in Denmark: between loud voice and implicit loyalty” in Magnus Feldman and Glenn Morgan (eds.), *Business and Populism: The Odd Couple*, Oxford University Press, 2023.

[36] Tugal, 2023, p. 12.

[37] Author personal correspondence, June 2023.



The measure also lacks a mechanism for discrimination, which is the key to Orban and Erdogan's recruitment of allies. A fraction of domestic capital has, certainly, made out well during Saied's tumultuous tenure. The banking sector printed record or near-record profits in 2022 and 2023: For the major shareholders collecting annual dividends, Tunisia's pain has been their pleasure.

Insomuch, however, as these parties have needed accept enormous risks in becoming the state's primary creditor (and significant downgrades to the credit ratings of their banks) in exchange for their day in the sun, it is not obvious that they are even eager to be benefiting from Saiednomics. Some of Tunisia's giant family-owned holding companies—namely, Amen Groupe, Groupe Horchani, Groupe Mabrouk, and the Poulina Group— have also weathered the past two years just fine by continuing to exploit loopholes in the tax code and indulging in tax avoidance schemes both legal and not.[38] But the fact that this narrow social group has benefited from Saied's rule is not the same thing as their having been incorporated into implicit partnership. After all, the companies in question are prospering based on pre-existing arrangements rather than Saied's discretionary assistance.

Once one moves away from these spaces of the economy, moreover, the going gets universally tough—and regime courting is nowhere to be seen. Unswayed by the hackneyed industrial policies rolled out and concerned for the capital losses which could be brought on by currency devaluations, many of Tunisia's traditional manufacturing players are keeping their dollars outside the country, and their investment flows directed in the same direction, too.[39] Reluctant to take the hand extended, those recruited by Saied's much ballyhooed Penal Reconciliation Law—introduced by executive edict and meant to lure back billions through trading amnesty for crimes past in exchange for new investments—have passed on the chance to become Carthage's new nationalist bourgeoisie.

Fearful of trumped up criminal investigations related to “hoarding” and squeezed by shortages triggered by the lack of hard currency, wholesale and retail traders serving the domestic market are ceasing to keep any inventory, resulting in day-to-day volatility for their businesses, and a lack of goods for consumers.[40] Medium, small and microenterprises, meanwhile, are priced out of the credit market due to the extreme levels of the state's domestic borrowing, and facing existential troubles as a result: A survey conducted by the Tunisian Association of Small and Medium Enterprises reveals banks demanding collateral at rates equivalent to 200-400% annual earnings—a request leading the vast majority of business owners to go home without a loan—and shows that more than two in three businesses of these sizes have now stopped activities.[41] A partnership with capital, then, could there no less be, and that is without accounting for Saied's ceaseless reference to unnamed traitors making off with the country's wealth. Factor in the disinvestment Saied has induced through his schizophrenic relations with his own economic policy team and rather than stabilize his rule through growth, one can see that he destabilizes it through utter dysfunction.

Saied's ventures into targeted welfarism do not pass muster, either. With migration back to the top of Europe's agenda, it is possible that Tunisian negotiators will secure an IMF loan package without needing to cut subsidies in the short-term, and this would constitute a kind of welfarist win for Saied.

■ [38] Author personal correspondence, June 2023

[39] Author personal correspondence with Tunisian businessman, June 2023.

[40] International Crisis Group, June 2022.

[41] Editorial Board, “L'hécatombe des PME tunisiennes face au silence de l'État”, *Business News*, June 13, 2023.

However, insofar as subsidy policies preexist the President and are, by definition, non-discriminating in nature, one would strain to see how such a win, should it come to pass, might convey the political gains that Orban and Erdogan accrue through their selectively hurting and helping of workers. Outside subsidies, moreover, the regime's record reduces to a lot of hot air. Decree Law 2020-33, meant to aid autoentrepreneurs in going formal—thereby gaining access to the social insurance system—is undermined by poor policy design. It has, by consequence, inspired precious little uptake from the population it is supposed to benefit. [42]

Annual financial laws passed during Saied's tenure, meanwhile, have had few measures for the less fortunate despite containing innumerable carve-outs for the rich.[43] Viewed in conjunction with insufficient provisions for public utilities (education included), it should therefore be apparent that regime budgeting has not been executed with an eye on lifting up a segment of the precariat a la Erdogan. Surely, noise has been made about redistributing state-owned agricultural lands (or the lands of those convicted of corruption) in such a manner as to support unemployed youth. To date, however, Saied and his governors have done nothing of substance to follow through. And Presidential Decree 2022-15 concerning community-based enterprises, meant to bring Saied's bottom up democracy to the economy, has, as of the latest reporting, yielded just fifty-eight new companies, the vast majority in the agricultural sector and concentrated in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and Gafsa.[44] Hardly, then, has this been a means for integrating formerly unemployed persons into the regime's social coalition at scale.

So where does this all leave us with Kais Saied? So long as Saied can pay the salaries of his men in arms—no guarantee given the delayed compensation of public sector employees which commenced in January of 2022, though an imperative more easily fulfilled due to enduring military aid from the United States and the European Union's funding of border security upgrades—it is possible he may endure. That all said, one cannot but come away from the comparisons just laid out with the feeling that Saied's house is built on wobbly foundations. The weaponization of the law and commandeering of the judiciary may lend his rule some solidity. Nevertheless, the view from the perspectives of political economy and mass organizing suggests the set up may be more that of Jair Bolsonaro or Rodrigo Duterte than Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Lest Saied's irrationalism be corrected, his politics evolved, and his development strategy reconsidered, a lifetime in office is difficult to imagine.

■ [42] See: Colin Powers, "The Political Economy of Social and Health (In)Security: Missing Growth, Policy Failure and Old Bargains Come Home to Roost in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia", Report, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, forthcoming 2023.

[43] Author Personal correspondence with tax experts, Tunis, June 2023.

[44] Moncef Mahroug (translation: Vanessa Szakal), "Community-based enterprises in Tunisia: mapping and overview", Nawaat, June 21, 2023.

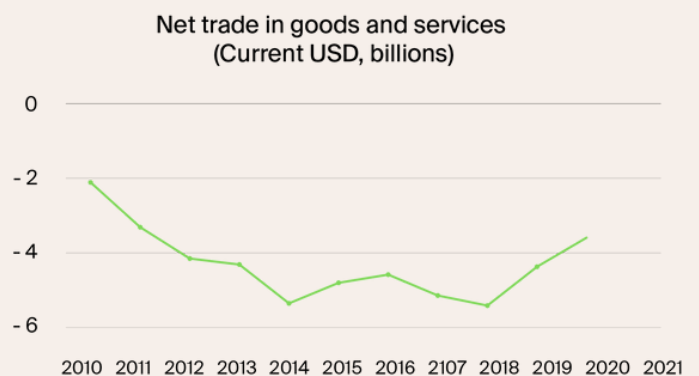
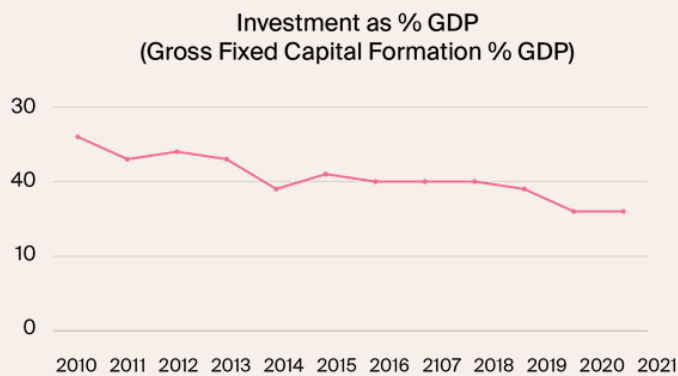
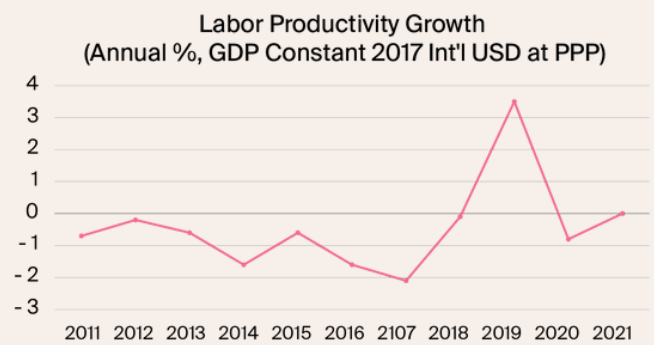
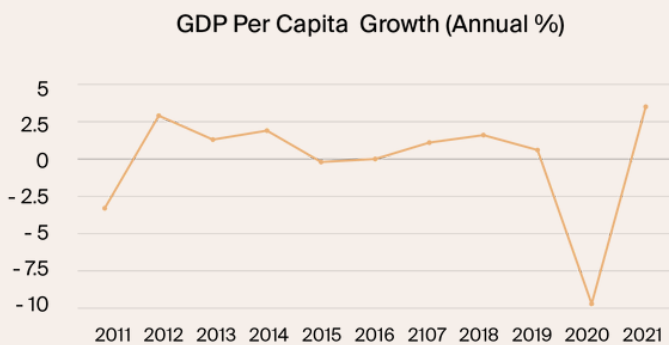
# 3.

# An Autocrat's Troubles Are Not a Democracy's Gains

And yet, the warning lights flickering for the regime of Kais Saied ought not signal that a restoration of democracy is afoot. This unfortunate truth can be grasped through appraising the conditions delimiting the horizon for political action in Tunisia today.

These conditions come most clearly into view after we first train our sights backward onto the democratic transition. As is at this point well established, a great many variables factored into the transition's demise. Some were structural in nature, the workings of the global economy included. From the jump, Tunisia's positioning within international systems of finance, money, and production was to mediate its democracy's capacity to deliver on popular desires for a more prosperous and equitable tomorrow. As it played out, a peripheral station within financial circuits, global value chains, and the hierarchy of currencies created sizable headwinds to growth and redistribution. In interacting with variables of chance, moreover, these headwinds were made considerably more intense. Most pertinent here were the bad luck events of state failure in Libya, the terror attacks of 2015, the coronavirus pandemic, and the Russo-Ukrainian war. All these shocks taxed Tunisia's macrostability in their own way. And in arriving at moments of grave weakness, they, in conjunction with woeful policymaking, ensured consistent and deepening economic underperformance: By most measures, the democratic economy would trend considerably below the line set via the corrupt and inefficient misrule of the late era Ben Ali. As bad year piled on top of bad year, this left the transition without much in the way of output legitimacy.

## THE TRANSITION'S ECONOMIC FAILURES IN FOUR CHARTS



Data provided by World Bank and International Labour Organization

### System failures

Problematic in and of themselves, deficits in output legitimacy were turned into an existential issue by the transition's simultaneous failures to generate input legitimacy. These failures derived from causes acting at the system and unit level.

At the system level, three variables stand out. Firstly, well-intended or not, the transitional democracy's reliance upon coalitional government, an outcome which can be attributed to the elite's gauging of the historical moment as much as to the adoption of a voting system based on proportional representation, begat a troubling habitus for the political classes. On the one hand, grand partnerships forged for the good of the nation—the troika of Ennahda, Ettakol and CPR; the pact of the two zaim (Beji Caid Essebsi and Rachid Ghannouchi); Ennahda, Qalb Tounes, and al Karama—incited cartel dynamics. These were most visibly expressed in the divvying up of ministries as spoils and the use of pork (i.e. elite favor trading) as a lubricant for governance. On the other, those partnerships encouraged relevant principals to treat policy as an afterthought while allowing each member to dodge responsibility for the ensuing dysfunction: Failure is truly an orphan when all the politicians of note have a hand in it.

The second system level variable was the democracy's inability to furnish the public the possibility of an elected alternative. This too derived from the transition's reliance on coalitional government: In everyone keeping a finger in the same rotting pie, none could credibly sell themselves as a candidate for change come election time.

For Ennahda, this unwillingness to accept a round on the backbenches would lead to the party's becoming a lightning rod for public anger as well.

The third system level variable was the form of political competition which democracy engendered. Reduced to its component parts, this was a form which combined emotively charged confrontation with an absence of substantive opposition. Animus on the campaign trail was never lacking and the parliament's halls were not infrequently host to crude defamations and circus-like scenes. Contrarily, goal differentiation, which Kirchheimer has elegantly defined as "disagreement over the ultimate goals of political action", was seldom seen.[45]

Each of these variables corroded the democracy's input legitimacy in its own way. The modality of coalitionalism described not only reduced the accountability and efficacy of government, but deprived voters of their ability to execute change via the ballot box.

With time, the shortcomings of the governments in power were thereby made indistinguishable from the perceived shortcomings of democracy as a political system. Furthermore, by leaning so heavily on pork and backroom favor trading, Tunisian coalitionalism invited the public's somewhat misdirected obsessions with corruption: This fixation would, among other things, open the door for Kais Saied's moralizing crusade, as we will discuss. Just as gravely, the modality of political competition which developed proved deeply alienating. Enraging the citizenry through empty theatrics while enervating it through the absence of meaningful social stakes, competition produced wellsprings of popular resentment which ran as deep as they did wide. At a number of critical junctures—the early days of Kais Saied's coup most obviously, but during subsequent attempts at mobilizing an organized opposition as well—this spread of disaffection and anger would show itself to be of decisive importance.

## Unit failures: Tunisia's political parties struggle to meet the moment

If system level variables left the transition on shaky ground with the demos, unit level dynamics did little to restore their faith. Here, we primarily speak of dynamics particular to democracy's essential handmaiden—the political party.

The performance of these key institutions during the transition can be best understood as the yield of processes both specific and non-specific to Tunisia. Amongst the former, single party rule, prevailing for the balance of the country's post-independence years, is most relevant. By virtue of associational life being repressed across the long tenures of both Habib Bourguiba and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, when the Democratic Constitutional Rally Party (RCD) was finally dissolved in March 2011, there would be no partisan organizations on the ground, with the partial exception of Ennahda, which possessed anything in the way of institutional memory or human resources: Having emerged more or less wholecloth during the transition, the shortage of in-house policy technicians and political operatives was especially acute.

Just as importantly, regardless of whether the parties in question were reconstituting after decades underground or coming into existence for the first time, they all proceeded into the great unknown of democratic politics without any social tethering.

■ [45] Otto Kirchheimer, "Germany: the vanishing opposition" in Robert Dahl (ed.) *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies*, Yale University Press: 1966.

This lack of mooring deprived them of ideological coherence: Where the mass parties of the mid-20th century global north, affixed to a given class or class fraction, came to not only represent the values and interests of that constituency but to articulate a larger vision of the good based on that constituency's particular condition, the Tunisian parties which gained a modicum of traction during the transition were socially adrift and, as a result, inclined toward a mix of ideological promiscuity and post-ideological platitudes.[46] In cherry-picking only to discard ideological positions and in failing to embed within a hold of the social structure, they ultimately left the democracy without a tenement that could stably contain while separating left from right. This, in turn, made it difficult for the citizenry to find a lasting partisan home and in so doing, obstructed the democracy's consolidation.

Set into abstraction, then, it might be said that the path dependencies set in motion by decades of single party rule impacted the supply of Tunisian partisans during the transition. Contrarily, historical processes non-specific to the country can be said to have more immediately impacted the demand side of the equation.

## The road to hyperpolitics

Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution had marked, in many ways, the end of the end of history, to borrow a phrase coined by Hochuli, Hoare and Cunliffe.[47] With its arrival, the post-political era of the long 1990s—rocked beyond repair by the rupture of the global financial crisis—came to an abrupt end. Thereafter, from Cairo and New York to Santiago de Chile and Baghdad, streets would pulse with indefatigable energy; world historic mobilizations of protest movements became commonplace[48]; art and music grew imbricated again with ideological content; and power structures, hard and soft, would be perceived as contestable. Contemporaneous with the resurgence of politics however, were developments in technology and culture which continued propelling social atomization. Changes to the structures of the global economy—realized through finance capital's establishment of transnational dominance—meanwhile, had long since calcified, and in a manner not easily unwound. Implying hard limits onto the sovereignty of nation states, this had a disorienting effect on the politically awakened, conveying that legislatures and the like might no longer be the site for delivering transformation.

From this coalescence of global processes, a novel phenomenon emerged, something Anton Jager has named hyperpolitics.[49] On the one hand, hyperpolitics, in its "incessant yet diffuse excitation", endeavored to reconcile the estrangement between policy and politics: to contest the substance rather than execution of policy—to mount a long-awaited popular challenge to technocratic governance. At the same time, the hyperpolitical challenge advanced "on terms unfamiliar to us from the twentieth century": Its form fashioned by implicit understandings of the global economic architecture and by the changes social atomization had wrought, challenge proceeded from outside the realm of formal politics. Political parties were absent and unwelcome in the hyperpolitical age, the agitation of civil society and kinetic, popular actions paramount: Think Occupy, the gilets jaunes or the millions marching not just in the United States but around the world in support of the movement for black lives. Neither those leading nor participating in bids of this type could countenance the notion of channeling their fight through a representative body. Decades of being let down by such institutions had taught their lessons, and the gap opened between elites, broadly defined, and masses was perceived to be unbridgeable. The pull of individualism, moreover, was felt even in instances of coming together.

■ [46] On these processes in the global north, see: Christopher Bickerton & Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

[47] See: Alex Hochuli, George Hoare, and Philip Cunliffe, *The End of the End of History: Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, Zero Books, 2021.

[48] On the scope of contemporary stress protests and those protests' inability to yield meaningful social and political change, see: Jamie Allinson, *The Age of Counter-Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

[49] See: Anton Jager, "Everything is hyperpolitical: a genealogy of the present", *The Point*, 29, February 22, 2023.

In Tunisia's case, there was also the edifying experience of the 2010-2011 uprisings factoring in. The lesson taken by many participants in the uprising was that horizontal forms of organization and direct modes of action had won the day. For those reconstituted through the revolutionary moment, they proceeded thereafter confident in the notion that that agency and power lied in the unmediated masses coming together for a shared purpose, that political triumph and self-realization was found in the street. This faith in what amounted to a kind of voluntarism remained widespread across the decade that followed and with it, a trust that voices raised in unison—thousands chanting bread, freedom and justice—could speak dreams into reality. The draw of direct democracy, partially enacted in the Kasbah during the winter of 2010-2011, also became extremely potent amongst revolutionary milieus.[50] Indeed, having toppled a dictator on their own, that these persons would now turn over their political subjectivity to a party spokesperson—that they would entrust an institution with enfolding their individual interests and values within a collective— was, frankly, preposterous.

Through a simple accident of history, then, the Tunisian transition's setting off during an epoch of hyperpolitics and in the wake of a very particular revolution determined that demand for political parties—demand to be a part of them, demand that they steer the democracy, trust in what they could achieve—was to be low. None of which, of course, is meant to absolve the parties of their responsibilities for how everything played out. It was they who forewent any attempt at building institutional existences outside of government—any attempt at growing into mass parties of yore, those which maintained an everyday presence in people's lives.[51] It was their approaches to developing and implementing policy which were wholly contemptible: Not only did they not invest in cultivating in-house capacity while outsourcing policy platforms to a host of local and foreign consultants, they also discarded the commitments contained in those platforms once in office with total shamelessness.[52]

It was their leaderships (and the leadership of the UGTT, it should be said), convinced they were agents of destiny, who regarded internal democracy with what could generously be called derision. And it was their indulgence in boullitique—in backroom, self-serving dealmaking done with little consideration for the public good—which affirmed popular suspicions that the new elites, like the old elites before them, looked at the citizenry with disdain.[53]

## The troubles of a public alienated from representation

Regardless of how one apportioned the blame, though, the effect was the same: With the passage of time, Tunisians moved ever further away from formal politics. As a rule, the cadre of activists who helped spearhead the revolution opted out of partisanization. Many of these principals instead migrated to what became a sprawling ecosystem of non-government and civil society organizations. The UGTT, the one social organization with a large and relatively well-disciplined membership, decided against forming a political party, too, concerned, perhaps, that governing an indebted country of the global south was a poisoned chalice. Less consistently politically engaged persons, meanwhile, largely gave up on associational life: Even those involved in popular mobilizations against things like unemployment—actions once anchored to national programs for economic change—retreated into parochial, highly localized claim-making by the end of the decade.[54]

■ [50] See: Henda Chennaoui, "Four years after the Kasbah Sit-ins: Taking stock of a revolutionary mission confiscated", *Nawaat*, 2015; Mohsen-Finan, 2022.

[51] See: Haifa Souilmi, "A tale of two exceptions: everyday politics of democratic backsliding in Tunisia", *The Journal of North African Studies*, May 2023.

[52] Author personal correspondence, Tunis, Paris, June 2023. See also: Nate Grubman and Aytug Sasmaz, "The collapse of Tunisia's party system and the rise of Kais Saied", *Middle East Research and Information Project*, August 2021.

[53] See: Robert Parks and Tarek Kahlaoui, "Populist passions or democratic aspirations? Tunisia's liberal democracy in crisis", *Middle East Research and Information Project*, November 2021.

[54] See: Irene Weipert-Femmer, "Unemployed mobilization in times of democratisation: the Union of Unemployed Graduates in post-Ben Ali Tunisia", *The Journal of North African Studies*, 25:1, 2020.

Rates of abstentionism ticked higher and higher with each national election. Polling data and the protest vote observed during the municipal elections of 2018 showed the degree to which parties had become objects of unique scorn.<sup>[55]</sup> Most destructively, belief in the notion that intermediating institutions were inherently corrupt and corrupting, if already high, evolved into a common sense. By the late 2010s, it would be no exaggeration to say that the idea of representation itself was seen as something of a con by a large share of the population. A trick, as it were, for diverting the revolution and stealing the country's wealth.

Within this frame, corruption stood in as both general theory and shibboleth, a nebulous explanation for what had befallen the transition and a tool for naming those who were to blame. Abstracted were corruption's relations to structural forces like capitalism, or considerations of means and ends—of pragmatist rationalities or possible social and developmental utility. Instead, the phenomenon was being conceived as one of individual ethical failings. And in casting forth without the compass of sociology or political economy, the discourse easily became lost in absurdism. Journalistic accounts showed a public convinced that the parties in parliament were siphoning off amounts nearly in excess of annual GDP. Social media exhibited multitudes expecting the police's arrest of Rachid Ghannouchi at his home to be accompanied by the discovery of untold millions in hidden wealth.<sup>[56]</sup> And the ill-founded claim that Tunisia would be prosperous if it could just stop the theft of the elites became pervasive.

Regardless of how one apports the blame, though, the effect was the same: With the passage of time, Tunisians moved ever further away from formal politics. As a rule, the cadre of activists who helped spearhead the revolution opted out of partisanization. Many of these principals instead migrated to what became a sprawling ecosystem of non-government and civil society organizations. The UGTT, the one social organization with a large and relatively well-disciplined membership, decided against forming a political party, too, concerned, perhaps, that governing an indebted country of the global south was a poisoned chalice. Less consistently politically engaged persons, meanwhile, largely gave up on associational life: Even those involved in popular mobilizations against things like unemployment—actions once anchored to national programs for economic change—retreated into parochial, highly localized claim-making by the end of the decade.<sup>[54]</sup> Rates of abstentionism ticked higher and higher with each national election. Polling data and the protest vote observed during the municipal elections of 2018 showed the degree to which parties had become objects of unique scorn.<sup>[55]</sup> Most destructively, belief in the notion that intermediating institutions were inherently corrupt and corrupting, if already high, evolved into a common sense. By the late 2010s, it would be no exaggeration to say that the idea of representation itself was seen as something of a con by a large share of the population. A trick, as it were, for diverting the revolution and stealing the country's wealth.

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■ <sup>[55]</sup> On the municipal elections of 2018, see: Mohsen-Finan, 2021.



Journalistic accounts showed a public convinced that the parties in parliament were siphoning off amounts nearly in excess of annual GDP. Social media exhibited multitudes expecting the police's arrest of Rachid Ghannouchi at his home to be accompanied by the discovery of untold millions in hidden wealth.[56] And the ill-founded claim that Tunisia would be prosperous if it could just stop the theft of the elites became pervasive. But the discourse did worse than propagate self-soothing falsehoods of this type. It also signaled and entrenched the moralization of politics—the final banishment of ideology from the scene. Thereafter, popular attachments to a democracy built around representative institutions frayed beyond the point of repair. The cleanliness of a would-be office holder became the abiding concern for a critical mass of voters. In this context, Tunisia's future reduced to one of three alternatives: neoliberal privatization, authoritarian takeover, or some combination of the two.

Given the low regard with which markets are perceived in Tunisia, the second road was always most likely, and taken it indeed was: An unsullied outsider, appealing to and feeding the public's fixation on corruption and distrust of representation, emerged onto the scene and presented a vision of direct communion between ruler and ruled. That he had neither plans nor intentions for wading into the wider waters of corruption, a space defined more by tax expenditures and value chains than under the table kickbacks, mattered little, as the problem had been reduced to one of ethics. Boosted by good fortune—by the parties' rallying around his flag so to block the ascent of Nabil Karoui—the outsider became President. And once botched pandemic policies, generalized government dysfunction—sowed in part by the President himself, willingly or not—and the police abuse of January 2021 combined to break the citizenry, that outsider was able to bring an end to democratic government, with the population at his back.

## Prospects for a democracy reborn obstructed by hyperpolitics

In the two years since Saied's self-coup, conditions on the ground have shifted though unfortunately not in a direction conducive to democratic restoration. Insofar ours is still the age of hyperpolitics, many of the underlying elements which had troubled Tunisia's parliamentary democracy—the distrust of intermediation most of all—linger on. Attempts by the luminaries of the transition era to organize resistance to Saied have, as a result, failed to gain traction. The National Salvation Front, the partisan coalition led by Ahmed Najib Chebbi and comprised of Ennahda, al Amal, Moncef Marzouki's al Irada, Al Karama, and Nabil Karoui's Qalb Tounes, has floundered, persuading far too few that the villains of the transition might now be agents of deliverance. Citizens Against the Coup, a civil society-led initiative, didn't catch the wind either.

The UGTT, it should be said, shows a slightly greater ability to channel collective energies. Still, Saied's power grab has opened obvious gaps between the federation's national leaders and those at the local, regional, and sectoral level. The federation's ability to speak in the general interest of the worker has also long been overstated, and its disjuncture from Tunisia's youth—for whom formal employment and union membership are a pipe dream—undeniable.[57] And so, if large groups of people still demonstrate a willingness to fight for their rights, they show an equal reluctance to do so through the vehicle of representative institutions—the institutions of the 2011-2021 era most especially. Protesters devolving into chants of "Rachid Ghannouchi is an assassin" at a gathering organized to contest Kais Saied's power grab in March 2023 evinces well the spirit of the times.[58]

[56] On this particular episode, see: Daniel Brumberg, "Kais Saied's fantasies are drowning Tunisia", Policy Analysis, Arab Center Washington DC, April 27, 2023.

[57] See: International Crisis Group, 2022; Zied Boussem, "Youth political perceptions in Tunisia: giving the floor to millennials and gen Z post-2011", Youth Trajectory Series, Arab Reform Initiative, May 2022.

[58] Hakim Fekih, "Tunisie. A gauche, fractures ouvertes face à Kais Saied", Orient XXI, April 26, 2023.

Auguring poorly for democracy as well is the intensity and extensity of political fatigue. Though still summoning the strength to hold the line against Saied as best they can, exhaustion and a creeping sense of fatalism—the fear that everything was tried and nothing worked—pervade opposition circles.[59]

Author personal correspondence, June 2023. The general public, meanwhile, if deeply attached to hard-won civil liberties, shows signs of political detachment. While imperfect measures, there is polling data to suggest public security and the economy are today priorities for a vast majority, and limited grounds for extrapolating that this majority thinks such objectives are ideally pursued through the reestablishment of constitutional balance or parliamentary democracy.[60] Working at cross purposes to a democracy resurgent too are the incubating politics of Gen-Z Tunisians.

Though generalized claim-making about the preferences and behaviors of such a large and heterogeneous category should be resisted, data gathered via focus groups conducted by Zied Boussen of the Arab Reform Initiative in May 2022 paints a picture of a cohort disaffected from formal politics and ensconced in the moralized discourse on corruption that was discussed earlier. Too young to have memories first-hand, Boussen's research also reveals a subpopulation with little connection to the revolution of 2011 and a dangerous mix of ignorance and nostalgia for the Ben Ali era.

There is also, of course, the increasing politicization of the Tunisian military—expedited in part by American trainers[61]—and the increasing aggressiveness of the Tunisian police, respectively, to reckon with. On occasion, the former has proven of utility to popular forces, as the military's defiance of Beji Caid Essebsi in 2017 when he ordered the securing of a Tataouine oil facility blocked by protesters indicates. Rumors that senior military leadership helped plot Saied's self-coup—and the unambiguous support they offered in executing it—however, suffice to show what happens when the other shoe of military politicization drops. Factoring in as well the top brass' documented preference for a strong Presidential system—never mind the example of Egypt—and it ought be clear that the Tunisia military's strengthening over the past decade is no boon for democracy's prospects. As for the police, their resurgence commenced in earnest under democratic oversight and was expedited in particular upon the passage of the (police union co-authored) Counter-Terrorism Law in 2015.[62] Empowered at this stage to intimidate, harass, assault and dox perceived enemies, they now constitute a clear and present danger to those who might attempt to organize dissent.

Taking the full field into view, then, the conditions for a revival of democracy are hardly auspicious. It is possible that an event, or series of events, might provoke a popular mobilization of such force as to topple Kais Saied: In deciding against buttressing his own control with intermediating institutions, the Tunisian President is liable to become a victim of the very hyperpolitics which previously helped sweep him into power. Even in such an eventuality, however, it is difficult to see how a healthy democracy might be built thereafter: The scions of formal politics compel little to no confidence and carry recriminations which make their finding a unity of purpose improbable if not impossible. Like body politics from across the world, Tunisia's evinces alienation and an unwillingness to either trust or participate in representative institutions. And the economy, for its part, is structurally compromised.

■ [59] Author personal correspondence, June 2023.

[60] See: Hannah Ridge, "Dismantling new democracies: the case of Tunisia", *Democratization*, 29: 8, 2022; Nate Grubman, "Do Tunisians still want democracy?", *Monkey Cage Blog: Washington Post*, September 1, 2021.

[61] Sharan Grewal, "Norm diffusion through US military training in Tunisia", *Security Studies*, 31:2, 2022.

[62] Matt Herbert, "Tunisia: Strengthening of security force unions blunts internal control", *Commentary, Istituto per Gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*, August 2, 2022.

How can democracy take flight in conditions like these? How can it consolidate when intermediation, as a principle and practice, inspires such scorn? How can it stabilize amidst ever-expanding surplus populations and entire generations without meaningful or productive station in the economy? What output legitimacy might even the best democracy deliver when the state's debt burden dictates austerity, when the international community's stomach for debt forgiveness is weak to say the very least?

Answers to any and all of these are exceedingly hard to come by. The implication for Tunisia, as for many other countries encountering the same social and economic conditions, is dire: Today's autocrat may go, but his replacement is likelier to be an authoritarian than a democrat.

# 4.

# Conclusions

In April of 2023, United States' National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan delivered a paradigm shifting speech at the Brookings Institution.[63] In introducing the Biden White House's "new Washington Consensus", Sullivan began by sketching how decades of misguided economic policy—neoliberalism, for short—fomented the rise of rightwing populism in America first and foremost, but around the world as well. Having identified this rise as a social, political, and ecological danger of the highest degree, Sullivan then explained how Biden's green industrial strategy, his "foreign policy for the middle class", and his recommitment to public goods and to the state itself would put the country (and world) back onto a more promising path.

Sullivan's speech and the policies it was meant to explain—principally, the Inflation Reduction and CHIPS and Science Acts of 2022—can certainly be said to represent a reason for hope for people in the United States: For a country as large and wealthy as the US, the mercantilist turn being instituted raises the possibility for an industrial revival, and with it, a society made less unequal, a democracy made less volatile.

Unfortunately, the changes afoot in Washington promise far fewer gains for those in other parts of this world, Tunisia included. In part, this is because the changes in question intimate a coming Cold War between the United States and China: It is the latter's rise, after all, and the White House's commitment to blocking the country's ascent, which prompted the American rediscovery of industrial policy in the first place. More than that, however, the lack of promise can be attributed to the fact that the "new Washington Consensus" contains no provisions for helping smaller, poorer countries carry out the paradigm shift that Sullivan is making the case for: If the National Security Advisor rightly identifies the social, developmental, ecological and political necessity of emboldened state interventionism in the economy, he and the government he serves are taking few steps to ensure that those in the global south are able to respond to this imperative. Indeed, the White House has shown itself unwilling to countenance even minor reforms to the international debt architecture, reforms that would have an outsized impact on states, like Tunisia's, which are increasingly hemmed in by obligations to creditors: Just this past spring, the US and Germany blocked the IMF from either issuing new Special Drawing Rights or ending its surcharge policy.[64]

For Tunisian democracy to ever have a real chance, the structures of the global economy—and the policies of the major powers preserving them—will need to change. This is because for Tunisian democracy to have a real chance, the Tunisian state too has to have the opportunity to rebuild the country's industrial base.

■ [63] For the full speech, see: Jake Sullivan, "The Biden administration's international economic agenda", Hutchins Center on Fiscal & Monetary Policy at Brookings, April 27, 2023. Available at: <<https://www.brookings.edu/events/the-biden-administrations-international-economic-agenda-a-conversation-with-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan/>>

[64] See: Patrick Bigger and Federico Sibaja, "Feasibility Pact?", *Analysis: The Polycrisis Series, Phenomenal World*, June 21, 2023.

Will that be an elixir for all the issues with hyperpolitics discussed in this report? Will it bring an end to Kais Saied's repressive rule? The answer to both questions is, of course, no. The challenges of grounding political parties back into society and of confronting a dictator who the security forces have, to date, found useful, are immense. Nevertheless, an international commitment to strengthening Tunisian industry would at least shift social, economic, and ultimately political conditions in a direction where parties might more organically embed into the social fabric, where a resurgent democracy might stand a better chance.

Trite though it may be to say, history makes plain that weak manufacturing begets weak labor parties begets weak political integration of popular forces begets poor chances for democracy.[65]

Responsibility for what has befallen Tunisia since 2021 resides, in the immediate sense, with Kais Saied. More distally, the troubles of today can be ascribed to the transition's leading partisans and all that has gone into making ours an age of hyperpolitics.

For those hoping for a better future for Tunisia, this distribution of blame has significant implications. Amongst other things, it reveals that the fight cannot reduce to simply contesting the current resident of Carthage. Which is not to say that diplomatic scoldings and well-intended efforts aimed at securing the rule of law or the rights of the media and political prisoners should be foregone. Rather, it is to say that these actions must be undertaken with the understanding that the impact of legalistic and procedural confrontations will be constrained by the fact that they do not mobilize popular forces, as the last few years can attest. Popular forces are best brought into the game through shifting the terrain socially and economically. As is such, while no guarantee for success, the best bet for Tunisian democracy is to be found by taking Tunisia's wider political economy into view. The road back to political liberty, in other words, will lie in the advance of green industrial activities as much as in the dispatching of election monitors, rewriting of constitutions, and promotion of NGO-styled civil society advocacy. The agenda for the pro-democracy coalition inside and outside Tunisia must therefore be expanded to include items like debt relief, the reforming of global trade agreements and the global financial system, the reassertion of capital controls. Absent progress on these fronts, any return to democracy will run aground in the same issues which troubled the post-2011 transition.

■ [65] For the development of these ideas, see Dani Rodrik, *Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

## Reference

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