

SIGHTLINES TUNISIA: SAÏED'S GRAND PROJECTS CONTINUE TO FLOUNDER

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■ In a scene already widely commented on by critics of the regime, Kaïs Saïed received Brahim Bouderbala, President of the Assembly of People's Representatives (ARP), and Imed Derbali, President of the National Council of Regions and Districts (CNRD) at Carthage on the seventh of May. Per the statement published on the Presidency of the Republic's website, the head of state told the two leaders of the parliament that it was necessary to “develop new solutions capable of resolving the country's economic problems, particularly the issue of youth unemployment.” Expectantly, observers pointed out that Saïed himself has been in office for nearly six years, and with what amounts to unchecked authority for four of them. A bit late in the day, one would think, to draw attention to Tunisia's cascading social and economic crises. Alas, three weeks later, Saïed returned to the theme in a speech made to the Prime Minister and Finance Minister. At long last, the reality of Tunisia's unending malaise appears to have dawned on the President.

If affirmation was needed, Saïed's public remarks establish that the socioeconomic crisis which led to the fall of Ben Ali and contributed to the turmoil of the post-revolutionary decade very much endures. His comments also give occasion to probe the Saïedian economy in greater detail.

I. The Grand Designs of a Disinterested President

During his 2019 campaign for the Presidency, Kaïs Saïed famously focused more on matters of the law and institutional design than he did on the economy. Three variables informed the choice. First, like much of the Tunisian political class, Saïed had little interest in or understanding of the economy. Second, inasmuch as he did think about the economy, he put little weight in industrial planning or centralized governance: As expressed in Saïed's imagining of “grassroots democracy”, policy was best directed through a pyramid-shaped system of councils, where the lower level bodies were empowered to propose and approve development projects so long as they honored his populist dictum—“the people want it and they know what they want!” No need, then, to ponder big reform plans. Third, the 2014 Constitution, still in force when Saïed was on the trail, had entrusted economic management to the head of government. If subsequent events would show Saïed had little respect for the constitution's wider division of powers, on the economic front, his actions conveyed an acceptance that it was not the President's prerogative or responsibility.

However, if development strategy held little purchase in Saïed's mind, there was one subject adjacent to the economy which had consumed his thinking as far back as 2012: anti-corruption and criminal reconciliation. The President's position on these issues derived from his misinterpreting an investigative report which had been produced by a post-revolution commission.^[1] The commission in question had been led by Saïed's mentor Abdelfattah Amor^[2] and tasked with determining the mechanisms of embezzlement which had prevailed under the fallen Ben Ali regime. Critically, their research centered on the revenue losses the state incurred by turning a blind eye to these practices; it did not attempt to estimate the ill-begotten gains captured by implicated parties. In fact, the report did not even venture ballpark figures. Nevertheless, without referencing any evidence, a minister at the time did forward the claim that nefarious actors had leveraged corrupt dealings into 13.5 billion dinars in stolen public wealth.^[3] And to this figure Saïed would anchor himself evermore. While still a professor, while on the campaign trail, and while President, he has spoken of this 13.5 billion incessantly. He has also made moves toward recovering this phantasm.

■ ^[1] Specifically, *La Commission nationale d'investigation sur la corruption et la malversation*.

^[2] Amor was the former President of the Tunis Law school where Saïed was a professor.

^[3] The minister in question was Salim Ben Hmidane, who served between December 2011 and January 2014.

II. Criminal Reconciliation: The Farce with no End

Upon granting himself total discretionary authority in 2021, Saïed issued a decree-law establishing the mechanism known as criminal reconciliation. The law established a commission responsible for investigating cases of corruption, either on its own initiative or at the request of principals violated. In circumstance where the commission determined guilt, the law presents two possibilities for reconciliation: restitution of the sums owed (with a penalty of 10% per year of delay), or a commitment to carry out development projects at the local, regional, or national level. The idea was that the most corrupt individuals should invest in the most needy regions.

Commencing work at the start of 2023, the commission was initially mandated to serve for one year. During the time allotted, the President expected it would gather his missing 13.5 billion Dinar. So confident was Saïed in its arrival that he constantly derailed his own ministers' negotiations with the IMF, as the prospective receipt of reconciliation money would obviate any need for a loan. Unfortunately for the President, come January 2024, the commission had only been able to haul in 26.8 million Dinar, just 2.19% of the target. And this was despite his dismissing many members and leaders of the commission on a number of different occasions.

Faced with this poor performance, Saïed amended the decree-law to transfer final arbitration procedures to the National Security Council (NSC). By Saïed's pen, the NSC was made a de facto court whose decisions were not subject to appeal. At the same time, dozens of businessmen were arrested and summoned to "negotiate" with the authorities. But once again, Saïed's interventions backfired. Far from resolving the situation, the legislative change completely blocked the process. At the time of writing, no information about ongoing reconciliation negotiations has been released in months. As all the major businessmen brought in to purchase their penance remain in prison, the data suggests no cash will be en route to the Treasury any time soon.

III. Community Enterprises: Empty Signifier Again

Community enterprises are the other flagship feature of Saïed's economic project. Unlike the criminal amnesty, they were not included in the candidate's 2019 election platform. However, they are very much in keeping with his overall ideological vision: Insofar as for Saïed, "the people" are best placed to organically find solutions that will get the country out of the crisis, it holds that simply getting "the people" a bit of capital for their businesses should do the trick.

To expedite this aspect of the Saïedist vision, the president promulgated a decree-law on March 20, 2022, Tunisian Independence Day. Under the terms of the law, community enterprises are designated as commercial entities dedicated to undertakings "that meet the needs of the inhabitants and are in line with the specific characteristics of the region."^[4] They are eligible to manage collective lands and charged with participating in the sustainable development and good governance of regions concerned while abiding by principles of corporate social responsibility.^[5] In the fine print, two types of community enterprises are qualified: (i) local companies, which operate within a single delegation or a group of contiguous delegations; and (ii) regional companies, which operate a governorate-

^[4] In Arabic, they are called الشركات الأهلية

^[5] Collectively held lands are mostly found in Tunisia's south. They were predominantly the common properties of multiple tribes engaged in pastoralism, their legal status entrenched from 1901 forward. Some were privatized over intervening years.

wide level. The former are under the supervision of the governors within which the delegations in question lie. The latter are overseen by the Minister of the Economy. As such, regardless of size, community enterprises are hardly free to express the will of “the people”: Rather, they are subject to the oversight of state representatives bearing significant managerial and disciplinary powers. In addition, as the decree-law includes ambiguous language prohibiting engagement “political activity,” it is the case that those state representatives retain wide discretionary authorities in fulfilling their supervisory mandates. Indeed, according to a study of this legislation by researchers at Legal Agenda, mere business planning sessions can be interpreted as “political activity.” The existing evidence, then, suggests, that Saïed's community enterprise venture was designed to allow his central authority to again impose its visions and orientations, this time on private decision-making circles.[6]

The material output of the community enterprise push is difficult to evaluate. According to the National Business Register (RNE), as of August 2024, only 70 community businesses had been created, the majority of which were of the local modality. A report published by the i-drak think tank based on the first two years of community business experience paints a negative picture as well. Entitled “Two Years Between Illusion and Reality”, the study denounces the fetishization of this type of enterprise by the government, notes a lack of appetite among citizens, and explains this by bureaucratic constraints that perpetuate the difficulties experienced by young entrepreneurs.[7]

This has not prevented Saïed from continuing to push and publicize the venture. Saliently, government departments, the Tunisian Solidarity Bank, and a few private banks have been mobilized to support social entrepreneurship. Predictably, Saïed has also attributed the venture's lengthy takeoff process to legal obstacles created by conspiracists within the state. To address these problems, the president appointed Hasna Jiballah as Secretary of State for Community Enterprises. This close associate of the original Saïed circles is not an economist, as evidenced by her statement that community enterprises are “tax havens.” In less than a year in office, Jiballah did managed double the number of functioning communitarian enterprises, bringing the total to 160 as of February 2025. Growth has not been accompanied with or led by a coherent vision, however. The Tunisian public waits, moreover, for reports on a businesses that has actually managed to scale or achieve sustainability.

Iv. Conclusions

After nearly six years in office, including four years with absolute power, Saïed has not made any significant changes to Tunisia's socioeconomic situation. His two flagship projects, criminal amnesty and community enterprises, were not backed by impact studies and have been haphazardly implemented. With his hands otherwise off the economic steering wheel, the President's rule has deepened the de-development of the Tunisian economy and left another generation without hope for a better future.

■ [6] See: Elleuch, M., Khalfaoui, M., & Ben Ghazi, S. (2022). *Le président veut. Contradictions et dangers du régime de la construction par la base*. Tunis: Legal Agenda.

[7] See: I-Drak. (2024). *Entreprises communautaires : deux ans entre l'illusion et le réel*. Tunis: IWatch.

Reference

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