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**Tunisia**

# **Far from Spring**

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**On 25 July 2021 Tunisian President Kais Saied dismissed the government and suspended parliament, arrogating exceptional powers to himself. These measures call into question the democratic framework and rights obtained through the fall of the dictator Ben Ali in 2011.**

On 22 September, the Tunisian head of state formalised his institutional coup d'état by promulgating emergency provisions strengthening his powers to the detriment of the government and parliament, which he will de facto replace by legislating by decrees. President Saied had declared that these decisions were of a temporary nature and were aimed at "the establishment of a true democratic regime in which the people are effectively the holder of sovereignty and the source of the powers they exercise through elected representatives or by referendum." A few days later, to form a new government, he appointed as Prime Minister Najla Bouden, the first woman in the history of the country to reach this position, whose prerogatives he nevertheless considerably reduced.

## Democratic framework at risk

But since his institutional coup, Saied has made dozens of arbitrary arrests, house arrests and travel bans, as part of his "anti-corruption crusade." This has not prevented the president from maintaining close relations with the employers' association UTICA, which for many activists is one of the main sources of corruption.

In mid-September, the secretary general of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), Nouredine Taboubi, warned the president for the first time, saying: "If you try to deviate from the path of a civil and democratic state, then the union is there, ready and experienced in struggle." The trade unionist also denounced the "seizure of power."

## No improvement in living conditions

Saied's authoritarian coup initially received quite significant popular support, because of the frustrations accumulated by broad sectors of the popular classes at the increase in social inequality, poverty, unemployment and the negligence of the ruling parties, against the backdrop of the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic. With nearly 24,500 deaths, Tunisia recorded the highest number of deaths per capita in the Arab and African regions. The country also recorded 7,773 social protests in the first six months of 2021, compared to 4,566 for the same period in 2020, according to recent statistics published by an NGO, FTDES.

The Islamic fundamentalist Ennahda movement, in power for 10 years through various government coalitions, was in particular the target of protesters who took to the streets to support the Tunisian president's measures. Ennahda has encouraged neoliberal policies, privatization and austerity measures, further impoverishing the popular classes. Successive Tunisian governments have become increasingly indebted to foreign creditors. The foreign debt accounted for about two-thirds of public debt in 2020, which raised many questions about debt servicing, sustainability and public resources that will be redirected towards its repayment rather than towards more productive objectives or the social protection system. Similarly, the movement's record on democratic issues is far from positive, with significant crackdowns on social movements and opposition to gender equality.

## Kaies Saied, an alternative?

The responsibility of Ennahda and other parties in power since 2011 is clear in the country's socio-economic and political crisis. That said, Saied is by no means a progressive alternative, quite the contrary. As Hama Hammami, the general secretary of the Parti des travailleurs tunisien (Tunisian Workers' Party), said, "the war between Saied and the political parties is not a war over different approaches to Tunisia's economic problems, but over power." Similarly, Saied is deeply conservative, opposed to equality between men and women in inheritance, the decriminalization of homosexuality and the abolition of the death penalty. Finally, his actions constitute a step backwards in the defense of the democratic rights of the popular classes.

We must oppose the authoritarian drift of President Saied, while supporting the progressive and democratic alternatives that confront Ennahda and the other parties in power, to prevent the return to a status quo which is unbearable for the Tunisian popular classes.

*PS:*

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