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Tunisia

# Towards a return to dictatorship in Tunisia?

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**The shocking images of the arrest of lawyer and columnist Sonia Dahmani on 11 May 2024, during a raid by balaclava-wearing the plainclothes police on her house in Tunis, broadcast live on France 24, were seen around world. However, this arrest is merely the sad continuation of the waves of arrests and repression that have swept across the country since the coup d'état of President Kaïs Saïed on 25 July 2021.**

Elected in 2019, Kaïs Saïed came to power at a pivotal moment of collective fatigue and the absence of a political alternative. A former university lecturer who had not held any political office, he rallied around himself by mobilising a populist discourse on the revolutionary forces and the popular will, of which he would be the one and only repository, thus discrediting all intermediary bodies - trade unions, media, associations and civil society.

## Concentration of power

On 25 July 2021, he initiated a legal restructuring with the promulgation of a new Constitution concentrating the main powers in the hands of the President. He attacked the democratic bodies and checks and balances created by the post-revolutionary Constitution of 2014.

A veritable hunt for opponents was then launched, targeting political opponents, judges, journalists, trade unionists, civil society associations and actors and, more generally, any person or structure critical of the new political leadership.

In this context, Kaïs Saïed uses the concepts of traitors to the nation, or even “mercenaries” who would “undermine the State in the name of freedom of expression”.

## Helping migrants criminalized

In order to win popular support, he has designated associations that help migrants as the real enemy from within, at a time when Tunisia, a transit point for Europe, is experiencing a huge influx of migrants.

In reality, civil society as a whole is under threat. Activists are reporting practices and humiliations the like of which have not been seen since the time of Ben Ali, with the return of increased surveillance, police raids on premises, telephone harassment and cases of obscure “foreign funding”, a real obsession of Kaïs Saïed.

The arrest on 6 May 2024 of anti-racist activist Saadia Mosbah is the latest stage in the criminalisation of the work of associations.

The new wave of arrests of lawyers and journalists in Tunisia since 11 May seems to be the logical continuation of this return to dictatorship, with Kaïs Saïed attacking the last bastions of freedom.

# Climate of fear

European governments are no strangers to this serious authoritarian turn. Although several officials have expressed “concern”, the fact remains that the European Union is perfectly happy with the new regime, to which it has entrusted the task of outsourcing its borders and managing migrants before they arrive in Europe, just as it was with Ben Ali’s regime.

The similarities between the two regimes are sadly confirmed. The arrest of lawyer Mehdi Zagrouba, following that of Sonia Dahmani, has rekindled a trauma: torture. Mehdi Zagrouba claimed to have been tortured by police officers just before his appearance before the judge, causing him to vomit and faint during the hearing.

More than a decade after the revolution, a climate of fear has returned to Tunisia, where freedom of expression seemed just a few years ago to be the only achievement.

Nevertheless, mobilizations and demonstrations are being organised to demand a fixed date for the presidential elections due to take place in the next few months. No deadline has yet been set as the presidential term draws to a close.

23 May 2024

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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