

# Tunisia: Two Years into the “Saied Era”

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**BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE SOUTH SERIES** – COMMENTARY

*By Yasmine Akrimi – North Africa Research Analyst*

## INTRODUCTION

Two years have passed since Tunisian president Kais Saied’s power grab in July 2021, and it is hard to even remember the ideals of the 2011 Revolution at this point. The country continues to make headlines for imprisoning political opponents, abusing migrants and facing repetitive cycles of shortages. On Tuesday night, prime minister Najla Bouden, who has been in office since Saied’s assumed all powers, has been replaced by Ahmed Hachani, a former Human Resources director at the Tunisian central bank with no previous political experience. If Bouden leaves with a less than average balance-sheet, there is no sign the new head of government will have the means, prerogatives or competencies to do better.

## THE HORRIFIC TURN IN THE “MIGRATION QUESTION”

Over the past few weeks, Tunisia has garnered attention due to its brutal treatment of black African migrants and asylum seekers. Hundreds, including children and pregnant women, have been forcibly deported at the frontiers with Libya and

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Algeria, left to survive in the desert's extreme conditions with injuries, amidst the massive heatwave the region experienced in July. Instances of abuse, torture, and even killings by Tunisian authorities and Libyan elements have been reported<sup>1</sup>. The image of a woman and her nine-year old daughter's dead bodies found in the Sahara has widely circulated on social media platforms. International singers Gims (a Congolese national raised in France) and Bigflo et Oli (French) even cancelled their shows in Tunisia, explicitly mentioning the ongoing dire humanitarian situation.

The state's response to tensions between migrants and locals in the city of Sfax, Tunisia's southern capital and a major departure point for Europe, has been marked by illegal mass expulsion campaigns.<sup>2</sup> These actions coincide with the country's signature of a €1 billion migration deal with the EU, led by Tunisia's new fiercest ally, Italian far-right leader Giorgia Meloni. Since Tunisia became the primary departure point for migrant boats trying to cross the Mediterranean, the EU has been eager to secure a "policing for cash" agreement with President Kais Saied. The EU's assertive diplomatic stance to curb irregular migration was not hindered by an increase in violent rhetoric and actions against sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia - au contraire, it intensified.

The migration question took a dramatic turn last February when President Saied published a communiqué, citing the "threat" posed by "the mass presence" of black Africans and alleging a "plot to modify the demographic composition of Tunisia". Since, a wave of violence and bigotry against those same migrants have been unravelling.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/06/tunisia-crisis-black-africans-expelled-libya-border>

<sup>2</sup> Tensions in the city of Sfax led to the death of a sub-Saharan African migrant in May and a Tunisian national in July.

## A SUMMER OF SHORTAGES AND CUTS

It is no secret that Tunisia has been witnessing consistent shortages in essential commodities, such as flour, rice, sugar, coffee, oil, as well as medicine. Additionally, there has been recurring cuts in drinking water, electricity, and gas. Bread scarcity is a particular concern, given the country's history of deadly "bread riots" in 1983 and 1984. As of 1 August, 1400 bakeries relying on non-subsidized flour announced they will no longer be making everyday bread. This adds to the challenges faced by subsidized bakeries, which have not received flour subsidies for the past two years. Certain regions like Nabeul, Sidi Bouzid and Gafsa have experienced electricity and water cuts, even affecting hospitals. During a meeting with the two CEOs of the state-owned water and electricity companies mid-July<sup>3</sup>, President Saied questioned the "strange concomitance" between food shortages and electricity and water cuts, signalling the Head of State was once again resorting to explaining structural deficiencies through conspiracy theories. Yet, the reasons behind such dysfunctions are known.

Tunisia is currently experiencing exceptional drought for the fourth year in a row, resulting in a significant drop of 42% in dams' reserves. In addition, financial difficulties experienced within the state-owned national water company, SONEDE, prevent it from conducting the necessary maintenance and repair work on water pipes and dilapidated pumps. The situation is further exacerbated by a massive heatwave Tunisia has been undergoing, with temperatures going beyond 50 degrees Celsius in certain cities. In July, the capital Tunis reached a striking 49 degrees, while the city of Tozeur recorded 57 degrees, making water and electricity cuts even more critical.

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<sup>3</sup> The water company SONEDE's CEO was dismissed a few days following the meeting with the president.

## POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN JEOPARDY

One cannot ignore the situation of political prisoners in Tunisia, which, although not as severe as neighboring countries, remains concerning. Journalist and director of the country's most influent radio station, Nouredine Boutar, political activist and member of the Salvation Front Chaima Issa, and former Minister Lazher Akremi, were recently released from prison after their arrest for "suspicion of conspiring against state security" in February. A dozen others, including lawyer and co-founder of the Salvation Front Jawher Ben Mbarek and political leader Ghazi Chaouachi, are still in prison under baseless accusations and without due process. The leader of the Islamist Ennahdha Party, Rached Ghannouchi, also remains in prison<sup>4</sup>, along with a number of the Party's figures and former ministers. Some newly-elected parliamentarians, all supporting the President, have even launched a motion to classify Ennahdha as a terrorist organization and hence ban its political activities, a move reminiscent of Tunisia's former Presidents Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's approach to the "Islamist question". Ultimately, the wave of political arrests, coupled with President Saied assuming all powers, contributed to the erosion of the political scene, one that has painfully been built following the 2011 Revolution.

On the second anniversary of President Kais Saied's coup de force of July 2021, both the authoritarian tendency of the regime and the country's socioeconomic crisis seem to be worsening. However, as the country continues to negotiate a deal with the International Monetary Fund and has agreed to a new migration agreement with the EU, Tunisia finds itself increasingly dependent on foreign money and foreign interests. With the designation of a new Head of Government, holding as

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<sup>4</sup> Arrested in April, Ghannouchi was sentenced to one year in prison for "apology for terrorism" following a complaint filed by a police union accusing him of inciting Tunisians to kill each other, after he declared Tunisia risks a "civil war" if leftist or Islamic parties like Ennahdha were to be eliminated.

limited prerogatives as the former and with growing social anger over inflation, shortages and migration mismanagement, the future is uncertain.

As Tunisia looks towards the potential presidential election in 2024, the nation stands at a critical crossroads, even though its occurrence and conditions remain undisclosed. The upcoming elections could become a defining moment for Tunisians to either endorse President Saïed's political agenda or to seek a new direction. The future of Tunisia's political landscape hangs in the balance, and the choices made in the coming years will undoubtedly shape the country's path ahead, either backwards or forward.

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## Author

Yasmine Akrimi | North Africa Analyst

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 [www.bic-rhr.com](http://www.bic-rhr.com)  [info@bic-rhr.com](mailto:info@bic-rhr.com)

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466