

The Tunisian Political Impasse Between Discourse and Praxis

RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – ANALYSIS

By Yasmine Akrimi – BIC North Africa Analyst

INTRODUCTION

The gap between president Kais Saied's radical political discourse and his appointment of a government – that exclusively answers to the president's authority – whose main task seems to be working out a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), renders it harder for observers of Tunisian politics to understand where the country is heading.

While the 2022 Finance Law maintained the same taxation logic that has prevailed for decades, disproportionately affecting mid-income foyers, conversations continue about the president's "direct democracy from the basis" alleged project.¹ Through an analysis of the 2022 State Budget, we posit there is a significant discrepancy between president Kais Saied's discourse and praxis, signalling strong populist tendencies and posing a threat to the very notion of representative democracy.

¹ The "democracy from the basis" project was the cornerstone of Kais Saied's 2019 electoral campaign. Since his election, president Saied never officially spoke about it. However, he never distanced himself from the spokespersons of the project's explanatory campaign who regularly appear in the media.

A RADICAL POPULIST DISCOURSE

Saied's 2019 "electoral hold-up" equally stemmed from his criticism towards the post-2011 governing political elite as it did from his focus on the failure to translate democracy into social justice and socioeconomic empowerment in Tunisia. The latter is crucial in understanding the scepticism Tunisians have gradually built vis-à-vis representative democracy. A 2019 article on the desire for democracy across countries which were implicated, in some form, in the so-called "Arab Spring", concluded two tendencies in the case of Tunisia : Firstly, the support for democracy saw a general drop since 2011, with a significant gap between the 20% with the lowest income and the rest of the population vis-à-vis democratic disillusionment, meaning the poorer the middle-class is getting, the less faith it grants democracy; secondly. Tunisians now link the lack of economic effectiveness with democratic rule.²

The president's elements of discourse remained consistent since his election in 2019. Saied posits himself as the embodiment of the "people's will", equating any criticism against his policies with an attack against Tunisians' sovereignty. His narrative always designates an enemy, either internal or external, which initially referred to the "corrupted elite", to gradually encompass his political opponents in general. Saied repetitively points to the inadequacy of the 2014 constitution and its resulting political system. As the president has been pushing for institutional change, which would certainly put an end to the Second Republic, his narrative insists the current electoral system is the outcome of political calculations, not cross-partisan consultations, and national consensus. Saied holds representative democracy responsible for dispossessing Tunisians from their sovereignty and has consequently been dismantling, not mending, its institutions. Since his power grab in July 25, President Saied froze the parliament, suppressed both the Anti-Corruption Authority and the Provisional Authority for the Control of the Constitutionality of Draft Laws, and is now heavily criticizing the High Council of

² Spierings, N. (2019). Democratic disillusionment? desire for democracy after the Arab Uprisings. *International Political Science Review*, 41(4), 522–537. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512119867011>

Judges and Prosecutors. Essentially, all post-2011 safeguards for democracy are under attack.

The president's economic language is equally consistent with populist traits as he repetitively puts aside the reality of numbers and the competency of economic experts to offer his own narrative about the country's socioeconomic crisis. One significant example is his insistence Tunisia is a rich country that needs to retrieve its 'stolen money' while doing very little to lobby for the return of the money embezzled under Ben Ali's rule. The president has also criticized credit rating agencies³ and international credit donors. Likewise, he has declared, at multiple occasions, that fiscal policy should be built on social justice and wealth redistribution. However, this year's Finance Law, as will be analysed in the second section, has remained faithful to the same model that makes individual citizens – including those who are economically vulnerable – contribute significantly more to tax revenues than businesses.⁴ Promulgated by presidential decree, the State budget has not been subjected to parliamentary debates and cannot be contested by the opposition for the first time since 2011. Although holding unprecedented prerogatives, President Saied was unwilling to bear responsibility for the Law, declaring it did not meet "the people's demands for fiscal justice".⁵

A PRAXIS SERVING THE STATUS QUO

It is no secret by now that Tunisia is in dire need of socioeconomic reforms, which should be prioritized over heavy institutional change. However, one looks at the country's crisis, either from a reformist liberal perspective or from a point of radical economic change, some sort of strategic policies have to be implemented in order for the country to revitalize its economy, severely weakened by a decade of short-sided policies, and worsened by the pandemic. This situation is precisely what propelled Kais Saied to the top of the political game.

³ The downgrading of Tunisia's rating by the credit rating agency Moody's from B2 to B3 in 2021 has weakened Tunisia's position in the international financial markets.

⁴ <https://nawaat.org/2021/12/29/tunisie-loi-de-finances-2022-business-as-usual/>

⁵ <https://www.webmanagercenter.com/2021/12/29/478282/kais-saied-paraphe-la-loi-de-finances-2022/>

However, the recently enacted 2022 Finance Law does not contain measures hinting to a new development model in line with decades-long demands, or even to a genuine reformist will. Direct taxes will increase by 12% and indirect taxes by 16,5%, indicating a lack of will to seek resources in tax evasion as well as an injustice vis-à-vis the middle-class, the VAT particularly affecting modest households because they consume a larger fraction of their income.

Two pillars of public service, health, and education will respectively lose 7,800 and 1,700 agents. The ministry of health's budget is reduced by 16%, principally for the benefit of the interior. The latter, along with the ministry of defence, profit from an increase of 11,000 agents. Around 2.4 billion euros are budgeted for investment and development expenditure, similar in value to previous years, yet lower in percentage of GDP. Support to businesses is only allocated around 30 million euros. As a comparison, neighbouring Morocco devoted almost 11% of its GDP in support of its businesses in 2020.⁶

In parallel, the finance minister announced that negotiations with the IMF will resume in early 2022. A leaked document⁷ details the agreement, spread out over four years, rendering Kais Saied's socioeconomic promises essentially unfeasible. Without an agreement with the IMF, Tunisia will not be able to obtain bilateral or multilateral credit, neither from the international financial market nor from allies such as the US and Saudi Arabia. The country's public debt was estimated at 85.6% of the GDP in 2021.

The IMF's loan to Tunisia is subjected to several unpopular austerity measures such as containing the public service's payroll and limiting State subsidies, as well as freezing recruitment and salaries in the public sector, at least between 2022 and 2024. Above all, the IMF requires a national concertation between Tunisia's stakeholders, including the trade union (UGTT) and elected political parties, in order to agree to financial aid, which contradicts the so-far strategy of President Saied to bypass representative bodies in decision-making.

⁶ <https://www.businessnews.com.tn/une-autre-loi-de-finances-etait-possible,526,115775,3>

⁷ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ers5HFeL5OB8mtDSxM5OIXPdAlg7E5SH/edit>

In his book *The Global Rise of Populism*, Benjamin Moffitt paints certain typical traits of populist leaders: a narrative based on a constant “state of crisis”, which post-July 25’s state of exception embodies perfectly; a discourse “made of negatives” (anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, etc.); an aversion for “complicated democratic systems” and a preference for the mechanisms of direct democracy which, as Moffitt argues, open the possibility for decision-making that is not possible within a system where institutions can offset excess of power; ultimately, authoritarianism as the general mistrust of the establishment allows the emergence of “fathers of the nation”. These characteristics are easily transposable to Kais Saied’s style of ruling.

Beyond the troubling rise of populism and its negative effects on the practice of democracy and citizenship, the gap between political discourse and lived realities bears consequences beyond one man’s rule in Tunisia. Tunisians have been suffering downward social mobility, political instability, and incompetent governance for over a decade. As the limited participation in the latest January 14’s protests indicate, “democracy fatigue” is deepening and people are no longer taking their anger to the streets, which might signal gradual depoliticization and indifference to public affairs.

If President Kais Saied – whose principal political capital is trust – continues to argue for the obsolescence of representative democracy, then citizens might as well lose faith in democratic rule and passively resign to accepting authoritarianism as inevitable. The president’s populist tendencies hence pose a threat to the only surviving democratic experience in the region.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

Author

Yasmine Akrimi | BIC North Africa Analyst



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

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