



Cause for Concern in Europe's Southern Neighborhood: Democratic Erosion in Tunisia

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"Robocop," as current Tunisian President Kais Saied has been nicknamed in the run-up to the October 2019 presidential election in reference to an American science fiction movie, originally had an incorruptible image. He was viewed by most as a clean cut, pale politician who spoke in outdated classical Arabic. When I was in the country on a research trip that fall, I had younger friends who still enthusiastically would show off their selfies with the then 61-year-old constitutional lawyer. Especially in a cross-cultural context, this usually led to lively debates about Saied's support for the criminalization of homosexuality. Tunisia's younger population seemed to turn a blind eye to these kinds of propositions, including Saied's position in favor of reinstating the death penalty. Too important was the hope that the new president would introduce direct democracy instruments, finally take the fight against corruption serious and bring about a shift of power away from the political elites and toward the population at large.

It is questionable whether anyone would have thought at that time that only two years later, on July 25, 2021, the self-proclaimed humble public servant would stage a "coup from above", dismissing Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi from office and suspending the work of parliament. What appeared to be a temporary measure in response to socioeconomically motivated street protests and the power struggle between "three presidents" – that is, the president himself, the Prime Minister and the speaker of parliament, Rached Ghannouchi – resulted in a constitutional reform exactly one year later. In a referendum that each of the major political parties boycotted and that only had a turnout rate of 30 percent, more than 95 percent of participants approved of a new constitution. The document de facto abolished the separation of powers and combined executive and legislative authority in the presidential office.

Why is the erosion of Tunisia's "lighthouse democracy," as German Chancellor Angela Merkel once praised it with regard to the legacy of the "Arab Spring", of importance for Germany and for Europe? Why would autocratization in Tunisia even be a cause for concern for US foreign policy? In geostrategic terms, Tunisia has never actually been relevant for Washington as raw materials are limited and trade flows are low. Consequently, the country has been viewed as a "backwater" for US foreign policy in the region, only being important for the Pentagon because of the proximity to Europe and the Sahel. For the European Union, however, as EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi put it in August 2020, Tunisia is considered a "key partner in the southern neighborhood". There is no doubt that this is very much related to Europe's strategic interests in the Southern Mediterranean such as the management of migration flows by promoting economic stability in the partner countries. President Kais Saied, who was initially perceived in Brussels as a resolute and popular politician, once almost appeared as kind of a figure of hope in this context as he promised to implement urgently needed economic reforms. The press release on the occasion of Saied's visit to Brussels on June 4, 2021, mentions talks with Charles Michel, President of the European Council, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission and David Maria Sassoli, President of the European Parliament, taking place in a "very cordial climate". The two sides acknowledged the importance of reform measures to boost economic growth, especially in the wake of the pandemic, as well as of topics such as education, culture and youth. But when only a few weeks later, the parliament in Tunis was suspended and the doors of the Bardo Palace remained closed, the European Parliament only reacted half-heartedly in its resolution of October 21, 2021: Concerned, but with little emphasis did the parliamentarians call for "a return to normal functioning of state institutions, including a return to full-fledged democracy and the resumption of parliamentary activity as soon as possible". If the European Union is serious



about this, it must reconsider its restraint and make greater use of conditionality as a mechanism of political influence, for example by partially suspending macro-financial assistance that might be beneficial to Saied's political aspirations.

Beyond economic policy issues, however, it is primarily the political message that counts: Europe and the United States would do well to send decisive signals and to take a clear position on the erosion of democracy in Tunisia if they do not want to jeopardize their credibility as normative foreign policy actors. After all, in the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, the EU and the United States have supported Tunisia with both words and deeds, hoping to contribute to the democratization process. Even before the end of the autocratic regime under Ben Ali, there have been attempts at democracy promotion, holding rounds of a very frank and critical political dialogue or informally getting in touch with the opposition.

In this context, the two external donors repeatedly readjusted their strategies and instruments during the years that democracy promotion was high on the agenda. When the European Union maneuvered itself into a situation of “burned” channels of communication in the 2000s as a result of very harsh criticism of the lack of freedom of expression, European diplomats quickly changed their approach in favor of a very cautious and quiet dialogue that nevertheless addressed drawbacks. A similar situation of readjustment occurred shortly after Ben Ali had left the country on January 14, 2011: Though President Barack Obama praised the courage of the Tunisian people and assured the backing of the United States, no direct financial support could be provided that quickly, partly because of skepticism among Republican legislators in Congress. The regional program of the “Middle East Partnership Initiative” – an initiative once set up by George W. Bush for democracy promotion projects in the region – nevertheless proved to be flexible. MEPI realigned its budget to free up more than \$26 million in order to support more than 30 projects in Tunisia working directly with Tunisian society.

Small and little-noticed steps like these point to the possibility of a values-based foreign policy even in situations of rapid political change or of other constraints. In addition, the community of those external actors working in democracy aid in Tunisia – be it organizations like the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute or the German political foundations – has naturally been very strong and active when it comes to carrying out programs at a low policy level to support civil society, political parties, the judiciary or the media.

For these reasons, Tunisia cannot simply be abandoned to its fate, especially in times of rapid decline in democratic quality and a slow death of democracy. It is all the more surprising that U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken did not visit the country when he departed for his trip to the Maghreb in May 2022. Furthermore, the transatlantic community must have noticed that in March 2022, Tunisia only agreed to support the U.N. vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in response to Western pressure. Against the backdrop of a shifting global balance of autocracy vs. democracy as well as a “third wave of autocratization”, this should ring alarm bells. Reason enough to put policy for Tunisia higher on the agenda in Western capitals.