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'Many see it as the only way out of the political crisis'

After a wave of protests rocked the country, Tunisian President Kais Saied fired the prime minister and dissolved parliament. Johannes Kadura reports

After massive protests all over the country against the Tunisian government on Sunday, President Kais Saied dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and froze the Tunisian parliament. What triggered the protests? And how did the wider population react to Saied's actions?

The current events were indeed triggered by the latest protests, although for some time already it was clear that they would happen. For example, many people on social media called on others to demonstrate against the government on 25 July. People across many cities responded to this call.

The people's anger was mainly directed against one of the ruling parties, the moderate Islamists of the Ennahda party. That's because Tunisia is in a deep crisis. Ten years after the revolution, the people are not really better off, both economically and socially. Because of this – and especially in the context of the pandemic – resentment against the government has grown. The government is seen as ineffective – and rightly so: it has neither managed to introduce reforms to improve the country's general political and economic situation, nor to get the pandemic under control. Tunisia is now in a very bad position globally, not only in terms of public health but also in terms of the economy.

It's in this context that these protests must be understood. In addition, there were other circumstances such as increasing police violence, especially against young protesters in the last few weeks. That was a socially explosive mix, which President Saied took as a reason to dismiss the government and freeze the parliament.

At the same time, the president's decision has been met with quite a lot of popular approval so far. On Sunday evening, when the decision

was just announced, there were car parades, honking concerts, fireworks were set off – people celebrated in the streets. At least in the middle class and in the conurbation of Tunis, many see it as the only way out of the political crisis and support the president's decision.

Saied invoked the Tunisian constitution to legitimise his actions. Most of the political parties represented in parliament, above all the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, which also holds the most seats, speak of an "attack on democracy" – some even of a coup d'état. How do you see this?

In fact, President Saied invokes Article 80 of the constitution, which he says allows him to declare a kind of state of emergency and rule by decree. He wants to do this initially for 30 days. We will have to see what measures he will take and how the period will develop thereafter.

Saied's interpretation – who is himself a constitutional lawyer, was a professor and is an expert in the field – is nevertheless somewhat far-fetched. Article 80 also says, for example, that parliament should continue to govern in a situation like this. This is not compatible with the freezing of parliament.

So Saied has cherry-picked from this article to serve his own political manoeuvre. Whether the whole thing should be called a coup d'état is of course also questionable – at least it is not a violent coup. There is popular support and a political impasse. This means that even if this step is not 100 per cent constitutional, one can still take the position that it was the only way out of the political deadlock. The decisive factor for the analysis will be how the situation will develop in the coming days and weeks.

How have the police and the military reacted so far?

The police and the military have been quite restrained. The military is under the supreme command of the president, while the police is under the minister of the interior – and thus also under the now fired prime minister Mechichi. Potentially, there would be a line of conflict between the security forces. At the moment, however, this does not appear to be the case: the police have not taken different sides than the military, they have so far remained impartial and are trying to maintain peace and order. This is a positive development and we should hope that it will remain this way. The military is also keeping a low profile, but prevented an attempt by the speaker of parliament and leader of Ennahda Rached al-Ghannouchi to re-enter parliament, following Saied's orders.

Tunisia – despite many economic and political challenges – has long

been considered the most successful example of a democracy emerging from the so-called "Arab Spring". Do we now have to fear a slide into authoritarianism?

Whether recent developments mean that Tunisia's experiment with democracy has failed and the country is falling back into an authoritarian regime remains to be seen. The trend is certainly worrying. The president's interpretation of Article 80 of the constitution was clearly very "liberal" in his sense – and it's indeed doubtful whether this decision was constitutional. At least Saied has announced his intention to protect democracy. I hope that we can take him at his word and that the hard-fought democratic achievements will not be reversed.

Saied's long-standing goal is to install a form of grassroots democracy in Tunisia similar to the system that existed in Libya under Gaddafi. To what extent this latest move is a means to this end remains to be seen. Until now, Saied's general political direction was well-known. At the same time, since his time in office, there have always been big question marks over the details of his political positions and plans. So a lot is still unclear.

However, it must also be said that the president would not have made this move had he not been sure of a great deal of popular support. This support is partly because of disenchantment with politics and democracy. At the same time, there is a large section of people who criticise the political elites but support and celebrate Tunisia's democratic achievements. This means that we cannot say that support for the president would only come from anti-democratic forces.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



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