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Tunisia's bumpy road to democracy

Tunisia's current crisis doesn't spell the end of its democratic transition. But it needs reliable partners — and stop malign foreign influence

On 25 July this year, Tunisia's President Kais Saied invoked the 2014 Constitution's Article 80 to dismiss the government of Hichem Mechichi and suspend parliament. This was his reaction to mass protests against ineffective economic and social policies of all the post-2011 revolution governments.

Since taking office, Saied had repeated his intention to put an end to the 'political mess' of Tunisian politics. Tunisians have long suffered from an unprecedented economic crisis. The foreign debt burden is over 100 per cent. The country's devastating Covid-19 crisis has further depressed the job market. Growing popular protests were often deemed illegal and severely repressed. Leading non-governmental organisations monitoring human rights in Tunisia denounced the state's brutal reaction.

President Saied said his key reason for announcing a state of emergency and seizing control of the country was the political deadlock in parliament. It was elected in 2019 and has been fragmented and dysfunctional ever since. The collapse of the health system also contributed to Saied's decision. Although a large part of the population welcomed his move, the ruling majority has called it a coup d'état. Tunisia's national trade unions and influential civil society organisations are paying close attention to developments and calling on the president to lay out a 'plan of action according to a clear and time-bound schedule'.

What's Saied's plan?

Yet Saied does not seem to be in any hurry to spell out his plan. At least, he left his press secretary to state that he intends to change the parliamentary political system, which exists since 2014, to a presidential one. It is therefore likely that a referendum will be held in coming months – one that may also be about drafting a new constitution. That would be a blow to what is widely hailed as 'the only democracy of the

Arab Spring'. However, it does not signal the end to democratic transition in Tunisia, especially because its free press and a strong civil society fight for guaranteeing human rights and freedoms.

A repeat of the Egyptian scenario is very unlikely. As the Tunisian political scientist Khadija Mohsen Finan writes, 'if the political transition is not crowned with success, due to very poor governance, it's still not the *old* regime. The counter-revolution did not succeed and Saied is not its standard-bearer. On the contrary, he continues to refer to the spirit of 2011.' Unlike his Egyptian counterpart, Tunisia's president is no military man. And since independence in 1956, the Tunisian army has never gotten involved in politics, which has earned it the people's respect and trust. Saied may have temporarily seized all powers but a return to a dictatorship is not in the cards.

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However, if the economic and security situation remains fragile with no end in sight, the high cost of living and lack of prospects may well increase social unrest. It is in Saied's interest to appoint an economist to lead the government and negotiate with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Together with other multilateral creditors, it holds almost 50 per cent of Tunisia's foreign debt and has the Tunisian economy in its clutches.

While there is little risk of violence, terrorist operations could put the brakes on the only democratic transition in the Arab world. In that case, the army could intervene to take power and 'restore order'.

Tunisia's international relations

If the European Union views the events of 25 July with scepticism, it's because Kais Saied has not explained his reasons or presented any plan. During his last visit to Tunisia, EU High Representative Josep Borell stated European concerns about Tunisia needing to consolidate its democratic gains. In response, Saied expressed his respect for the country's constitution and ongoing democratic process – and insisted on Tunisia's sovereignty.

While waiting for publication of the roadmap, Tunisia has to count on its friends, especially Germany. Indeed, the relations between the two countries have deepened since the revolution. Many Tunisians appreciate Germany most among all foreign countries. Germany was also the first country to provide significant amounts of money to support Tunisia's

democratic transition – and elevated it to a strategic partner.

The process of transformation however is long and difficult hindered by economic woes, terrorist attacks, and especially the dysfunctional electoral system put in place in 2011. Political actors repeatedly demonstrate their inability to put national interests before partisan and personal pursuits. Tunisia doesn't just need financial assistance from the EU, and especially Germany, to develop its democracy. It also needs help building strong and durable institutions to stave off foreign influence in domestic affairs.

Since 2011, Tunisia has become fertile ground for the conflict between the Gulf monarchies, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on one side, and Qatar – supported by Turkey – on the other. With Saudi help, the UAE, whose role in the region often goes unrecognised, is fighting with Qatar over political Islam – and by extension, democracy. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi prefer order and stability to democracy. Like many Arab revolutionary movements, Qatar and Turkey are close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

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Since 2011, Qatar and Turkey have unfailingly supported the Islamist Ennahdha party, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia have gone another route: Since 2013, the UAE (and later the Saudis) have not hesitated to give a 'financial helping hand' to the late President Beji Kaid Essebsi and his Nidaa Tounes party. The fall of Ennahdha in the 2019 elections was a real blow for the Turks and Qataris.

Since his election, Kais Saied has continually repeated that 'there is no room for interference in the country's choices that stem [from] the will of the people' – also in reaction to the G7's communiqué from 6 September 2021, in which the group called for Tunisia to respect its constitution by quickly nominating a new head of government. In light of all these intrigues, it would be good for Tunisia and its northern neighbours to consolidate their relationship and strengthen their collaboration.

What can the German government do?

Germany has good reason to support Tunisia – with not just grants but also loans to modernise railways, ports, power plants, schools, and hospitals. It should encourage Tunisian policy-makers to make the financial and economic system more transparent and implement the

reforms needed to improve the investment climate.

Germany should also push German and European companies to actively participate in Tunisia's urgent economic reconstruction. That would be a win-win for all partners because it is geopolitically, socially and economically important to invest in Tunisia. An economic upswing and clear improvements in the quality of life would significantly reduce the very high unemployment that drives some Tunisians to seek to migrate illegally.



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