



## Crisis of Democracy in Tunisia

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On 25 July, Tunisian President Kais Saied suspended parliament, dismissed the prime minister, and assumed full executive power. This is the most serious political crisis in the country since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The president's actions may interrupt the democratisation of Tunisia, which will require a reformulation of EU policy towards this country.

### What happened?

The president, citing Art. 80 of the constitution, dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and his government, and suspended the work of parliament for 30 days, taking over executive power for this period. On 26 July, the president imposed a curfew, a ban on movement between cities and on gatherings of more than three people. The army surrounded the buildings of the government and parliament, keeping the speaker of the parliament, Rached Ghannouchi, from entering the building. The police stormed the offices of Al Jazeera, ordering the immediate suspension of the journalists' work. Some Tunisian experts and politicians equate Saied's actions with a *coup d'état*. They emphasise that the state was not threatened with a level of destabilisation that would prevent its functioning, which is a condition for the application of Art. 80. The implementation of this provision also implies the opening of a permanent parliamentary session.

### What is the socio-economic context of the crisis?

The president's actions were preceded by mass protests in response to the deteriorating economic situation and the government's inability to manage the crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic—in July, the death rate was 1.4 per 100,000 people, the second worst result in the world. These were another in a series of demonstrations that have erupted regularly since 2018 in response to the high level of unemployment (17% in 2020 and about 35% for people aged 15-24), high inflation (5.7% in 2020), and corruption. Although Tunisia remained the only country to undergo a democratic transformation after the Arab Spring, [fragmentation in parliament](#) and a lack of political will have

prevented the progress of anti-corruption reforms and increase in private sector participation in the economy, which are key to improving the country's financial situation.

### How will these latest events affect the further democratisation of the country?

It is likely that the crisis will hinder the further democratisation of Tunisia, permanently increasing the scope of the president's power, which may lead to the return of a dictatorship. Although Saied claims that the implementation of Art. 80 was motivated by the protests and ineffectiveness of the government's actions, a document released in May showed that the president's advisers had been urging him to take full power in the face of the state's financial difficulties. Saied's ambitions were also reflected in his claim to be the commander of the security forces (under the constitution, they are controlled by the prime minister), his refusal to ratify a law allowing the election of members of the constitutional court, or to swear in ministers elected by the prime minister. Although 85% of Tunisians do not trust the government, the public is divided in its assessment of Saied's actions.

### What has been the international reaction?

During a phone conversation with Saied, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken insisted on maintaining the political dialogue and stressed the importance of continuing the democratic transition. The EU called for the resumption of parliament and the restoration of institutional stability as soon as possible. Among the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, the Turkish and Qatar authorities, which maintain close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood (the Al-Nahda party, which dominates the Tunisian parliament,

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originates from it), reacted most critically. Saudi Arabia expressed support for Tunisian stability and security, which in light of [the Kingdom's efforts to consolidate authoritarianism in the region](#) can be interpreted as support for Saïd. At the same time, Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian media have responded positively to the Tunisian president's activities, describing them as a fight against terrorism and Islamism.

## **What could the current crisis mean for EU policy towards Tunisia?**

The crisis is jeopardising the achievement of the long-term goal of EU policy towards Tunisia, which is to have a pro-European, democratic ally in the region that would serve as an example for other countries in the southern

neighbourhood. Between 2011 and 2018, the EU committed €2.5 billion to support Tunisia's transformation. If Saïd's actions lead to a prolonged suspension of Tunisia's democratisation, the EU should make further financial support conditional on resuming the reforms. In order to increase the effectiveness of such policy, cooperation will be necessary with, among others, the U.S. due to the potential for rapprochement between Tunisia and China/Russia, which frequently support authoritarians. The current crisis may deepen the destabilisation of Tunisia, which would increase the scale of irregular migration from this country to the EU. This threatens the instrumentalisation of this phenomenon by the Tunisian authorities to prevent the EU from conditioning its support.