Democracy in Tunisia: An Uncertain Path

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Tunisia's turbulent journey toward democracy, focusing on the factors that have shaped its political trajectory since 1987. Beginning with Ben Ali's authoritarian rule, which marginalized religious factions despite economic liberalization, Tunisia's struggle for inclusive development led to the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, uniting various political groups to overthrow him. Although a new constitution was adopted in 2014 and elections were held, Tunisia continued to face economic challenges, with political polarization deepening between secular and religious factions. The rise of Kais Saied in 2019, initially seen as a populist figure, marked a shift toward authoritarianism, undermining Tunisia's fragile democratic institutions. The paper highlights the complexities and contradictions of Tunisia's democratization process, suggesting that despite initial hopes, the country's democratic experiment has been short-lived due to disunity among key constituents, namely the religious and secular-progressive factions. The paper concludes with a call for further research into Tunisia's current political landscape to better understand its democratic backsliding and the broader implications for the region.

Keywords: Democracy, Tunisia, Secular-Islamist, Authoritarianism, Ben Ali, Kais Saied

Introduction:

The West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region has experienced unprecedented protests and regime overthrows, beginning with Tunisia in 2011 after Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation. His act sparked widespread protests against corruption and poor treatment, leading to the ousting of President Ben Ali. Similar movements spread to other countries like Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Jordan, driven by dissatisfaction with economic policies, such as subsidy cuts, rising unemployment, and inflation. Secular-Islamist cooperation played a crucial role in both the protests and subsequent nation-building. In Tunisia, cooperation between secular and Islamist

parties, particularly Ennahda, helped address key issues, including drafting a new constitution. However, the dream of establishing Tunisia as a model of democracy was short-lived. Although a new constitution was adopted in 2014 and elections were held, the country continued to grapple with significant economic challenges, and political polarization between secular and religious factions intensified. The election of Kais Saied in 2019, amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, signaled a shift in Tunisia's political landscape. Initially seen as a popular outsider promising change, Saied's presidency quickly veered toward authoritarianism, undermining the fragile democratic institutions that had been built since the revolution. This paper seeks to examine the complex interplay of factors that have shaped Tunisia's democratic trajectory, exploring the rise and decline of democracy in the country since 1987 and the role of political divisions in shaping its future.

Historical Context: Fall of Ben Ali

Following Tunisia's independence in 1956, Habib Bourguiba pursued significant reforms across social, political, and economic spheres, prioritizing secularism over Islamism. These reforms initially advanced state welfare and societal development but faced setbacks by the late 1960s due to economic collapse and criticism from religious groups. Bourguiba's socialist economic policies faltered, leading to public discontent, growing unemployment, and Islamic protests led by the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI). By the 1980s, widespread dissatisfaction with slow economic growth and government inefficiencies culminated in Bourguiba's ousting in 1987 by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Perkins 1986; Ware 1988).

Ben Ali introduced ambitious economic reforms aimed at transforming Tunisia into a modern, pluralistic society. Guided by the Bretton Woods institutions, his administration pursued structural adjustment programs through five-year development plans (1987-1991 and 1992-1996). The reforms focused on stabilizing macroeconomic conditions, privatizing state assets, attracting foreign investments, and liberalizing trade. While these initiatives achieved moderate success—such as an average GDP growth rate of 5% during the 2000s and a rise in the service sector's contribution to GDP from 55% to 62%—the reforms produced uneven regional benefits. Coastal areas thrived, but the interior regions remained marginalized, exacerbating inequalities (Achy 2011; Paciello 2011).

Despite these efforts, Ben Ali's policies often failed to deliver substantial economic benefits. Tunisia struggled to attract foreign investment in manufacturing, and public sector firms retained a significant share of the economy. Crony capitalism became rampant, with Ben Ali's family monopolizing key sectors, benefiting disproportionately from privatization, and controlling resources through coercive tactics. This fostered widespread public anger, especially as unemployment rates rose and food prices soared during the 2008 global economic crisis

(Anderson 2011; King 2009). Tunisia under Ben Ali also witnessed rising youth unemployment, particularly among university graduates. By 2010, unemployment reached 14%, with young Tunisians bearing the brunt of joblessness due to inadequate vocational training and limited economic diversification. The socio-economic grievances, compounded by regional disparities, violated an implicit social contract between the authoritarian regime and citizens, fueling dissatisfaction. Data manipulation by the National Institute of Statistics masked the severity of these issues but could not quell public frustration, which became a catalyst for the 2011 Jasmine Revolution (El-Khawas 2012). Simultaneously, Ben Ali's regime imposed severe restrictions on press freedom. Media outlets were state-controlled, and censorship was pervasive, with journalists facing harassment and self-censoring to avoid repercussions. These suppressive measures amplified public resentment, contributing to the regime's loss of legitimacy.

The Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), later rebranded as Al-Nahdha, emerged as a major opposition force, challenging Bourguiba's secular policies and Ben Ali's authoritarianism. While initially tolerated by Ben Ali, Al-Nahdha faced severe repression after its strong electoral showing in 1989. Ben Ali's government accused Al-Nahdha members of plotting to overthrow the regime, leading to mass arrests, unfair trials, and widespread crackdowns on suspected members. Human rights organizations condemned these actions, labeling them as violations of fair trial norms. Al-Nahdha's suppression symbolized Ben Ali's intolerance for political dissent, further eroding public trust in the regime (Amnesty International 1992; Collins 1996). The crony capitalism of Ben Ali's regime, marked by the monopolization of industries by his family, particularly his wife Leila Trabelsi, and their extravagant lifestyles, intensified public anger. Revelations of corruption, such as land acquisitions and forced closures of businesses for personal gain, further alienated citizens. The U.S. ambassador noted widespread hatred toward the Ben Ali family due to their exploitative practices, which contributed significantly to the regime's downfall during the Jasmine Revolution (El-Khawas 2012).

The cooperation between Islamist and secularist forces in Tunisia presents a unique case of collaboration in the Arab world. Historically, Tunisia's Islamists, particularly Ennahda, were known for their radical stances and clashes with secular groups, as seen in violent episodes during the 1980s and 1990s. These tensions allowed President Ben Ali to justify repressive measures against Ennahda, which initially gained public support due to fears of extremism and calls for sharia-based restrictions on women's freedoms. The Algerian Civil War further reinforced a collective desire to avoid violent Islamist-secular conflicts in Tunisia. By the 2000s, Islamist groups like Ennahda shifted to moderation, influenced by failures in countries like Iran, Sudan, and Palestine (Gorman 2018). Learning from these examples, Ennahda adopted a pragmatic approach, emphasizing democracy, sovereignty, and judicial independence. Dialogue between Islamists and secularists began in this period, reflected in efforts like the 1994 National-

Islamic Conference and initiatives by figures like Hamadi Jebali, who advocated concessions to avoid polarization.

The 18th October 2005 movement marked a turning point. Islamist and secular opposition groups united to demand political freedoms, expression, and the release of political prisoners. This unprecedented cooperation fostered mutual respect and common goals, challenging Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. Ennahda's alliances with secular groups, such as the PDP and human rights organizations, strengthened opposition unity. While Ben Ali repressed the October 18th Movement, it catalyzed collaboration among diverse opposition forces, focusing on democratic reforms, women's rights, and freedom of conscience. Despite suppression, this cooperation laid the groundwork for Tunisia's later political transitions (Gerges 2013). The pragmatic moderation of Ennahda and alliances with secularists proved pivotal in reshaping Tunisia's political landscape and resisting authoritarianism. In summary, Tunisia's trajectory under Bourguiba and Ben Ali highlights a complex interplay of economic mismanagement, social inequality, political repression, and corruption. These factors, compounded by global economic challenges, created fertile ground for the 2011 uprising, marking the end of Ben Ali's rule and the beginning of Tunisia's democratic transition. However, the legacy of these regimes underscores the persistent challenges of achieving equitable economic growth and genuine political reform.

Tunisia's Path to Democracy since 2011

Tunisia's current democratic backsliding, often attributed to Kais Saied's actions, must be understood within a broader context. Civic space had already started to diminish by 2018, and Saied initially enjoyed significant public support. The political landscape in Tunisia has been marked by a bipolar party system, primarily polarized along the secular-religious divide. This polarization persisted despite a deepening economic crisis and significant socio-economic and center-periphery disparities. These dynamics eroded social trust, creating fertile ground for the election of a populist president who ultimately suspended Tunisia's democratic system. After Tunisia transitioned to democracy, civil society and media became more open, and previously banned parties like Ennahda, representing Political Islam, were legalized. Ennahda won the October 2011 Constituent Assembly elections and formed a coalition with two leftist parties. However, its entry into politics intensified the religious-secular divide, dominating debates around Sharia law, Tunisia's personal status code, and the equality versus complementarity of men and women. Tunisian women became symbols of these broader cultural tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, feminism and Islamism (Grami 2018). This identity-based polarization sidelined issues affecting marginalized groups, such as rural and impoverished populations in Tunisia's interior regions (Khalil 2014). This pattern of polarization aligns with broader trends in the Arab region, where the central political cleavage is identity-based—centered on the role of religion in politics and society—rather than class. Islamist and secular

parties in the region show minimal differences in their economic and developmental attitudes, particularly regarding globalization and democracy. Thus, the religious-secular divide reflects cultural and identity issues rather than divergent economic ideologies (Wegner and Cavatorta 2019).

As identity-based polarization intensified, Tunisia's political landscape became dominated by Ennahda and the secular Nida Tounes party. The year 2013 marked a pivotal moment, with contrasting outcomes in Egypt and Tunisia. While Egypt experienced a military coup removing President Mohammed Morsi (Muslim Brotherhood), the Rabaa massacre, and a return to autocracy, Tunisia followed a path of compromise. During this period, Ennahda engaged with secular and old-regime elites in "bargained competition" (Boubekeur 2016) or some other describe as a "consensus-based power-sharing system" (Brumberg and Salem 2020) Mediated by the Quartet and supported by international actors like the EU and IMF, Tunisia formed a technocratic caretaker government. This compromise culminated in the proclamation of a new constitution in January 2014. Later that year, Nida Tounes won the parliamentary elections and entered a coalition government with Ennahda, showcasing Tunisia's capacity for negotiated political solutions amidst regional turbulence.

While Tunisia avoided an Egyptian-style collapse, significant issues persisted. Although inter-elite trust improved through consensus-building platforms, it remained insufficient compared to competitive democratic systems (Brumberg and Salem 2020). This consensus-based power-sharing failed to address the socio-economic grievances that fueled the uprisings, as structural reforms to tackle economic challenges, establish transitional justice, and curb corruption were neglected. Consequently, marginalized groups, especially the youth, became increasingly alienated from the political system. Trust in government, parliament, and the judiciary steadily declined, with trust remaining high only in the armed forces. Afrobarometer data reveals that political polarization deepened, with around 60% of Tunisians agreeing that multiple political parties create division and confusion, particularly in 2013 and from 2020 onwards. This polarization primarily revolves around the religious-secular divide (Wegner and Cavatorta 2019). During this period, Tunisia experienced intense waves of contentious politics, marked by protests, sit-ins, and strikes concentrated in the peripheral interior regions. These actions were primarily driven by widespread dissatisfaction with unemployment, corruption, and austerity measures. As Meddeb highlights, the number of protests surged significantly, rising from 4,416 in 2015 to 8,713 in 2016 and reaching 9,091 in 2019 (Meddeb 2020).

Populism gained traction in Tunisia during the 2018 municipal elections and the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. A rising dissatisfaction created opportunities for antisystem leaders to present Tunisian-style populism. The 2019 elections saw populist leaders capitalize on grievances such as foreign interference by Gulf states and pressures from the EU

and IMF, with national sovereignty becoming a central theme (Brumberg and Salem 2020:19). Gender issues also played a significant role, as government efforts to promote gender equality were criticized. The elections revealed a deeply polarized and fragmented sociocultural landscape, with right-wing religious populist parties like al-Karama gaining 21 seats in parliament (Brumberg 2019). Kais Saied, a political outsider, won the presidency through a populist campaign that highlighted the divide between the corrupt elite and the "pure" people, encapsulated by the slogan "the people want".

The rise of populism and erosion of social trust in Tunisia coincided with democratic backsliding from 2018/19 onward, following challenges like judicial independence, corruption, and socio-economic inequalities. Despite entering a consolidation phase after the 2014 constitution, Tunisia's democracy remained fragile and short-lived. From 2018/19 onwards, Tunisia's once vibrant civic space faced significant attempts to shrink, with increasing crackdowns on popular mobilization, including mass arrests by security forces. Journalists, particularly those critical of the government, faced growing intimidation. Additionally, a bill was introduced to criminalize online defamation, and a law was passed requiring civil society organizations to register and provide detailed information about their activities.

President Kais Saied's institutional assault on democracy coincided with Tunisia's deepening economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which the government struggled to address. Amid growing protests, Saied suspended parliament, dismissed the prime minister, and announced his intention to rule by decree, later extending the suspension of parliament until 2022. In 2022, Saied dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council and took further actions to consolidate power, including dissolving the parliament after it attempted to repeal his decrees (Huber and Pisciotta 2023). Kais Saied has engaged in electoral manipulation, delaying parliamentary elections and holding a national consultation in 2022 with minimal participation, while presenting a referendum on constitutional reforms as a success despite low voter turnout. He has also begun altering the composition of the electoral commission. While civil society, academics, and media have continued to express dissent and debate Saied's actions, the pressure on opposition parties, journalists, and activists has been increasing. High-profile arrests, including politicians and journalists critical of Saied, and actions like the eviction of Al Jazeera and the replacement of the national TV director signal growing repression, although some private media outlets remain operational. On the other hand, concentrated media markets, particularly online platforms, have allowed elite owners to block media regulation and spread unchecked bias, misinformation, conspiracies, and extremism. This has fueled deepening divisions, polarization, and mistrust in the democratic process, contributing to the rise of populist and authoritarian figures aiming to undermine democratic institutions and seize power (Bennett 2023).

Conclusion:

This paper has explored Tunisia's turbulent journey towards democracy, highlighting the complex and often contradictory forces at play. Ben Ali's promise of democratization faltered early as his authoritarian rule marginalized key groups, particularly religious factions, despite liberalizing the economy. His failure to ensure inclusive development led to the Jasmine Revolution, where diverse political forces, from religious to progressive leftists, united to overthrow him. However, the hope of building a vibrant democratic Tunisia remained short-lived. Despite the adoption of a new constitution in 2014 and subsequent elections, the country continued to struggle with economic challenges, and the political divisions between secular and religious forces deepened. The rise of Kais Saied in 2019, amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, marked a turning point. While initially seen as a populist figure, Saied's actions soon eroded Tunisia's fragile democracy, culminating in a de facto authoritarian regime that dismantled the constitution. This paper is based primarily on secondary sources, and while it provides valuable insights into Tunisia's political trajectory, readers should exercise caution in interpreting the findings. Further, more rigorous research is needed to deepen the understanding of Tunisia's current political landscape and the broader implications of its democratic backsliding.

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