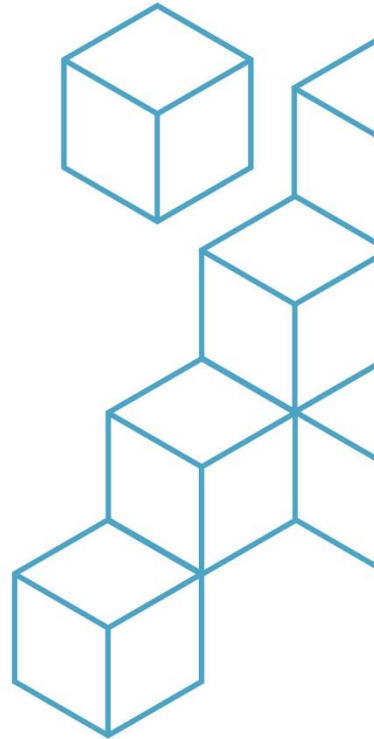


## **POLICY BRIEFS**

# **After the 25 July constitutional referendum: Codification of autocratic rule heightens Tunisians' fears of the future**



**\*Aljazeera Centre For Studies**

August 7 2022



**The European Union and the United States have condemned Saied's power grab and urged a return to democracy. [Anadolu Agency]**

Tunisia's new constitution was approved in a referendum held on 25 July 2021 that saw anaemic turnout of less than one-third of the electorate amid opposition calls for a boycott. The poll comes a year after President Kais Saied first introduced emergency measures that concentrated powers in the presidency and entailed the dissolution of most of the constitutional institutions created in the decade of democratisation following the revolution.

While the president initially had popular momentum behind his programme—he came into office in 2019 with a whopping 72 percent of the vote—his popularity has eroded sharply over the last year as many Tunisians have lost faith in his ability to address economic woes, improve living conditions and fight corruption. The opposition has expanded over the same period, with coalitions emerging on the left, right and centre of the political spectrum. Protests and strikes have also been staged by social groups like lawyers, judges and academics.

But regardless of his declining popularity, the president seems determined to move ahead with his plans to reengineer the Tunisian political order based on the new constitution. Given the current undemocratic state of affairs, he has likely understood that he does not need a popular mandate to act, especially since other conditions work in his favour. For one thing, the opposition, despite its breadth, remains divided and is unable to mobilise enough popular pressure to influence decision-making, particularly within key state institutions like the army and the police, which are more impervious to popular pressure. And as Saied's popularity has declined, he has begun to lean more heavily on these two institutions of hard power, introducing major shakeups in the leadership of the internal security forces in the past few months. In addition, the role of previously vital institutions like the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) has receded, as the central leadership seems more inclined to push for policies within the new constitutional order than to join the opposition. The union's initial acquiescence to Saied's antidemocratic measures, its reluctance to join the opposition, and its commitment to the political and ideological biases of its leaders have weakened this major social organisation, severely limiting its options. Finally, although the European Union and the United States have condemned Saied's power grab and urged a return to democracy, the West is unlikely to put real pressure on the president. In contrast, Saied has the firm backing of anti-democratic Arab regimes, in particular Algeria, whose ongoing support is indispensable.

The main challenge facing the president is the worsening economic crisis, which could trigger widespread social unrest. Since seizing the reins of power over the past year, he has done nothing to address the crisis or allay the concerns of his constituents. In contrast to his expansive political vision, Saied has put forward no new policy ideas to address the ailing economy. His government's actions have been limited to negotiating with the International Monetary Fund and other donor bodies for loans and assistance in exchange for structural reforms, which, if implemented, would likely exacerbate economic pressures on Tunisians.

If legislative elections are held as scheduled in December, the new political order they will usher in will be utterly different than that of the last decade, or even the preceding period. Although the current landscape does not favour the political opposition—and the new election law is specifically designed to defang political parties—it could build on its successful campaign to boycott the referendum to form a united front. To become an effective force, however, three conditions must be met. First, the opposition must unite against the looming threat facing all political parties. Second, it must become less elite-oriented and turn its attention to ordinary people's concerns and grassroots action. Third, the UGTT must take a clear stance against the authoritarian project that poses a threat to both political action and trade unionism. While these conditions do not currently exist, future developments will be determined in large part by all the major actors' responses to the economic and social challenges facing Saied's project in the post-referendum period, and the political role and influence of the various parties may shift accordingly. As for the kind of national dialogues and political and social compromises that have characterised the last decade of governance in Tunisia, however urgently they are needed now, they seem unlikely to bring progress this time given Saied's repeated rejection of such methods.

**\*This is a summary of a policy brief originally written in Arabic, available [here](#).**