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# Escalated Repression Reveals the Depth of Tunisian President's Predicament

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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About six months after the presidential coup against the constitution in Tunisia, President Kais Saied has moved forward in implementing the roadmap he presented for the next stage, which aims to change the constitution to enhance executive powers. Meanwhile, the opposition is expanding to include more social and professional sectors and political parties and movements. A new policy in the civil movement against the president, in parallel with the entry of the financial and social crisis into a stage that threatens with serious repercussions. In parallel, the financial and social crisis has been plaguing the country has begun to threaten serious repercussions.

## Escalated Repression

Since the coup last summer, the opposition has mobilised to form the “Citizens Against the Coup” movement, which, along with the Workers’ Party, and the “Social Democratic Parties” organisation (the Democratic Current, Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties, and the Republican Party) and various public intellectuals and legal figures, has called for numerous resistance activities. The way that the authorities responded by the opposition activities on the anniversary of the 2011 revolution was unprecedented. The violence that met the demonstrators in the capital on 14 January marked a remarkable transformation from the earlier forms of repression that had included restrictions on movement and roadblocks.

As soon as the opposition forces announced their decision to organize rallies on Revolution Avenue, in the centre of the capital, on the anniversary of the revolution, the government was quick to instigate measures to prevent gatherings and demonstrations. Although the government’s statement justified the decision as part of the efforts to contain the latest wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the opposition movement took the decision as a thinly veiled attempt to suppress protest Saied’s actions given that schools, universities, restaurants, and cafes were kept open despite the overcrowding.

On 14 January, the security forces set up security barriers to prevent access to the centre of the capital, forcing the protesters to gather in side streets, where they were pursued by the police in large numbers, using batons, tear gas, motorbikes, and hoses spraying polluted water mixed with incendiary chemicals. One protestor’s death was announced days after his disappearance, as the authorities attributed the causes of his death to a stroke, while the protesters and political and human rights groups confirmed that he had been subjected to violence before his arrest, and circulated photos and videos of the moment he was injured in the demonstration.<sup>1</sup>

Violence against peaceful protesters marking the anniversary of the revolution was met with a widespread denunciation, fuelling opposition to government policies. The Democratic Current, Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties, and the Republican Party issued a joint statement, denouncing “the systematic repression and the subjugation of the Ministry of Interior to serve the

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<sup>1</sup> “Tunisia: A Protester in the January 14 Demonstrations Dies of an Injury as a Result of Police Violence,” *The New Arab*, 19/1/2022, accessed on 24/1/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3Arl08p>.

coup authority,” and blaming “the head of the coup authority, Kais Saied, and his interior minister, Tawfiq Sharaf El-Din.”<sup>2</sup> The National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists considered what happened to be a further use of “repressive measures in managing public affairs for an authority that has failed in the face of corruption, terrorism, poverty and marginalization.”<sup>3</sup> The Syndicate issued a joint statement with 21 human rights organizations, including the Association of Democratic Women and Lawyers Without Borders, asserting that “using security to prevent resistance to the head of state’s policy will not discourage his opponents from continuing to protest and demonstrate peacefully for change and to preserve the democratic gains and public freedoms that were destroyed in the streets,” and vowed to “remain vigilant in order to counter the police and security unions’ influence.”<sup>4</sup>

The Speaker of the House of Representatives also condemned the “blatant attacks on political and civil leaders and citizens who came to express their views civilly and peacefully,” stressing that “peaceful demonstration and freedom of expression is a right guaranteed by the constitution, law and international covenants.”<sup>5</sup> Ennahda condemned “the security forces’ prevention of peaceful demonstrators from freely expressing their views and accessing Revolution avenue, attacking national political symbols, and exercising various forms of police violence against them,” calling for “a cessation of violence against demonstrators and the infringement of freedoms, especially freedom of expression, and the release of detainees to enable the National Anti-Torture Authority and lawyers to access them and examine their condition.”<sup>6</sup>

## A War with the Judiciary

Although Saied’s attack on the judiciary began from the night of the coup when he announced that he would take over the Public Prosecution office himself, before retracting that under pressure from the Supreme Judicial Council, recent weeks have seen his tone escalate. On 19 January, Saied issued a decree revising the Basic Law of the Supreme Judicial Council, which stipulates “putting an end to the grants and privileges granted to members of the Supreme Judicial Council.”<sup>7</sup> Saied’s decision to target the Supreme Judicial Council, by depriving its members of their grants, was met with the council’s call on judges to “uphold their independence,” condemning “interference in their work and systematic pressure and distortion campaigns against them,” and warning of “the danger of compromising the constitutional integrity of the judiciary through the issuance of decrees,” while

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2 Democratic Current Facebook page, 14/1/2022, accessed on 21/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3GPNSuE>.

3 “Police Repression Compensates for Democratic Mechanisms on the Tunisian Revolution Day,” National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists Facebook Page, 15/1/2022, accessed on 21/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Kw3kyk>.

4 “Human Rights Organizations Demanding an Apology from the Head of State,” *Mosaic FM*, 18/1/2022, accessed on 21/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3KxWQPt>.

5 “Communique on the Eleventh Anniversary of the Revolution,” Rashed Ghannouchi Facebook page, 14/1/2022, accessed on 21/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3qP6XYv>.

6 Ennahda page, Facebook, 14/1/2022, last seen on 19/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3fMksBo>.

7 “‘Just a Job within the State.’ Kais Saied ‘Tightens’ the Judiciary after Parliament, *Arab TV*, 20/1/2022, accessed on 21/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/35cJqs5>.

emphasizing its “adherence to its regulatory powers” and “continuing to perform its duties in defence of the independence of the judiciary.”<sup>8</sup>

In effect, the president, with his possession of all legislative and executive powers, has only the judiciary left outside his authority, and he is determined to take it under his control. Saied affirmed on more than one occasion that he rejected one of the most important components of the democratic system - the independence of the judiciary - by denying that the judiciary is an independent authority, considering it an administration of the state, with no role other than to implement the laws issued by the authorities. In the current Tunisian case, these are the decrees issued by President Saied himself, meaning that the president believes judges to be his employees. The president’s tense rhetoric toward the judiciary finds its justification in recent rulings issued by judicial circles, according to which a number of opponents were released from custody pending cases of insulting the president, and according to which decisions taken by the Ministry of Interior to place political activists under house arrest were also annulled.

## Battling the Media

The media has not been sheltered from the war that President Saied is waging on multiple fronts. On previous occasions, he has criticized the state-owned media and demanded that they amend their editorial line and give his activities a priority in media coverage,<sup>9</sup> and he did not miss any opportunity to recall that the media, according to his opinion, like the judiciary and other institutions, is subject to corrupt, lobbies and political parties. In fact, his disparagement of the media, and its failure to bear its responsibility in defending democracy, are among the most important reasons for Saied’s accession to power.

In recent weeks, the frequency of attacks and harassment of the media has increased, in parallel with the escalation of the president’s rhetoric. On 14 January, more than twenty journalists were subjected to security forces’ violence while covering rallies organised by the opposition, despite carrying badges indicating their professional identity.<sup>10</sup> Setting a new precedent, on 12 January security forces in dozens of vehicles; including those belonging to the Anti-Terrorism Unit, surrounded and stormed the headquarters of the official TV, entering the broadcasting hall, and forcing the workers to cancel the strike they were intending to carry out.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Statement”, Supreme Judicial Council Facebook Page, 21/1/2022, accessed on 22/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3AlojiO>.

<sup>9</sup> “The First National News Bulletin: Confusion and Mood in the Absence of an Editorial Policy,” *Nawaa*, 17/9/2021, accessed on 22/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3rJdnay>.

<sup>10</sup> “Tunisia: Attacks on Twenty Female Journalists and Journalists during the Demonstrations,” International Federation of Journalists, 17/1/2022, accessed on 22/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3fLHBEz>.

<sup>11</sup> “Walid Munasser: Security Vehicles Surrounded the TV Headquarters and Security Forces Entered the Final Broadcasting Hall,” *Jawhara FM Radio*, 13/1/2022, accessed on 22/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3GTg0x7>.

In the context of re-directing the editorial media line to serve the president's plans to put all state facilities at the service of his project, and to cut off any voice opposing him, the Presidency issued instructions to official television and radio stations to prevent members of political parties from entering their headquarters or participating in their programmes. This type of state interference in the media has not been seen since the revolution. Although the director of the official television denied the existence of such instructions, more than one party confirmed this, the head of the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists included, describing the measure as "seriously threatening the freedom of the press and perpetuating individualism in power."<sup>12</sup> Such instructions are confirmed by the People's Movement, which supports Saied, issuing a statement expressing its "astonishment at this decision, which contradicts the most basic elements of professional and media neutrality by a public utility that belongs to all Tunisians."<sup>13</sup> Recently, political programs broadcast by the public media have been observed devoid of any participation by parties, including those supporting Saied, instead allocating a space to cover and broadcast the president's speeches in full.

## The President's Predicament

Monitoring measures taken by President Saied since 25 July 2021 reveals an upward trend in their direction. What began with a temporary freeze of the parliament's work, ended up - after six months – with the suspension of the House of Representatives, and most articles of the constitution, seizure of all legislative and executive powers, restrictions on the independence of the judiciary, besieging the media, suppressing freedom of demonstration and expression, and the restriction of political party action.

Although the extent of the president's actions has raised eyebrows among some Tunisian circles who initially supported him, those who have been observing his rhetoric and political behaviour are aware that he has been going in this direction since the initial coup against the constitution.

There is no doubt that partisan and parliamentary bickering, and the failure of successive governments to bring about a tangible change in living conditions, prepared the ground for the coup and led multiple sections of society to support Saied's measures, at first, in the hope that a positive change would occur. But the six months that followed the coup have revealed the limited horizon of the populist discourse and behaviour adopted by the president, and his inability to fulfil his own promises. Economic and social conditions have worsened. It is expected, according to the available indicators, that the next stage will be more difficult in light of the large gap in the public budget, the worsening deficit and the rise in debts, the caution of external financiers and the difficult conditions they impose to proceed with any lending.

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<sup>12</sup> "The National Syndicate of Journalists in Tunisia: All Political Parties are Prohibited from Entering State Television by a Political Decision," *France 24*, 11/1/2022, accessed on 22/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3H59eEk>.

<sup>13</sup> "Statement on Forbidding Representatives of Political Parties to Participate in Talk Shows at the National Television Corporation," People's Movement Page, 19/1/2022, accessed on 22/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Kzgfzp>.

In light of the decline in the level of political and partisan support for the president, the only party that still supports him is the People's Movement, and other party components that do not enjoy any parliamentary representation or popular support. Given the frustration felt in his social base of support, due to the exacerbation of living and service crises, it is expected that Saied's dependence on security services to clamp down on the media, the judiciary, and national bodies, and to suppress critics of his policies will only increase.

The results of an opinion poll conducted by the Sigma Conseil Foundation revealed that Tunisian confidence in President Saied fell in December 2021 by four points (62 percent) compared to November (66 percent), and fifteen points for October (77 percent). As the same poll indicates, 47 percent of Tunisians who responded last December consider Tunisia to be on the wrong path.<sup>14</sup>

In light of this, the president is relying on divisions within the opposition and the lack of vision and ability to mobilize the popular groups that represented the fulcrum of the 2011 revolution. Although his policies of exclusion and defamation have not excluded any party; including the parties that initially supported him, the opposition forces are still caught up in their ideological rivalries and calculations, remaining unable to agree on a comprehensive project to preserve the revolution and halt the descent into totalitarianism. However, this situation is unlikely to prevail for long given the exposure of the president's inability to impose the changes that he claimed he came to make.

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<sup>14</sup> "November Political Barometer: Decreased Confidence in Saied and a Sharp Drop in Optimism," *Ultra Tunisia*, 17/11/2021, accessed on 24/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/32sOE3J>; "The Political Barometer: Tunisians Have No Confidence in Ghannouchi and Karoui," *Mosaïque FM*, 14/12/2021, accessed on 24/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3tPZElF>; "It Remained at a High Level.. Sigma: Optimism Declined in the Country," *Ultra Tunisia*, 19/9/2021, accessed on 24/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Hcbn1r>.