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What's Next for Tunisia as Opposition to Saied Grows?

Unit for Political Studies

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Tunisia's anti-government protest movements have expanded in recent weeks as the country's cost-of-living crisis deepens and opposition to President Kais Saied's one-man rule grows. Saied has meanwhile stuck to the political roadmap he unilaterally imposed and continues to reject any dialogue with his rivals or even partnership with his supporters.

Despite this broadening opposition, and a consensus among the political class that the current economic and political crisis poses great dangers to Tunisia, the opposition still lacks a clear and agreed-upon strategy to force Saied to renege on his coup and return to democratic process.

Saied's Policy Failures and Growing Opposition

For the first few weeks after Saied's 25 July 2021 power grab, few protestors took to the streets of Tunisia. The main political parties made do with issuing press releases condemning the "constitutional coup". Official media pushed a populist discourse demonizing the 10-year democratic transition that had followed the country's 2011 revolution, calling it a "black decade" of failures, blaming politicians it labelled "thieves", "traitors" and (foreign) "agents". The official narrative also heralded a new era of prosperity, accountability for corruption, the recovery of stolen state funds and similar slogans.

But as the economic crisis deepened, living costs spiralled and Saied grabbed ever more authority, refusing to partner even with those who had supported his constitutional coup, the situation began to change.

As Saied concentrated power in his own office, he started using the state's bureaucratic, security and judicial organs to shut down opposition to his rule. Many political figures were arrested and brought before military courts on charges relating to their political activities. Journalists and bloggers were harassed or imprisoned on charges such as "harming the prestige of the president". Saied also issued a presidential decree imposing heavy penalties on activities related to freedom of expression and sharing of information¹, and prevented media outlets from hosting representatives of political parties or covering opposition activities².

Meanwhile, it became clear that Saied's promises to fix the economy had little basis in reality. The economic crisis deepened, the dinar plummeted in value, consumer goods went missing from the shelves, prices shot up, fuel supplies were disrupted, and many kinds of vital medicines were nowhere to be found. Meanwhile the state was gradually removing subsidies on basic foodstuffs, water, and electricity.³ These failures started chipping away at the support Saied's populism had initially enjoyed, and opposition to his policies began to grow.

¹ Tunisian Presidency: "Decree 54/2022, September 13, 2022, on fighting crimes related to information and communication systems", Official Gazette of the Republic of Tunisia, No. 103, 16/9/2022 (accessed on 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3wmnDIR>

² See also: "Escalated Repression Reveals the Depth of Tunisian President's Predicament," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 24/1/2022 (accessed 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3XrvEag>

³ Imene El Hamdi, "Tunisian elections amid economic woes: the International Monetary Fund sabotages candidates' promises," Al-Araby Al-Jadid, 16/12/2022 (accessed 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3j1cABG>.
See also: Imene El Hamdi, "Rising prices add to Tunisia's suffering: complaints of lack of basic goods and warnings of worse," Al-Araby Al-Jadid, 10/12/2022 (accessed 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3XR0Xin>.



Deep but Fragmented Opposition

The first movement to form in opposition to Saied was Citizens Against the Coup, made up of political and academic figures from a variety of backgrounds. The group organised its first protest in early September 2021, mobilizing a considerable number of demonstrators in this and subsequent events.

Citizens Against the Coup later became part of the National Salvation Front, whose creation was announced by veteran politician Ahmed Nejib Chebbi on 31 May, 2021. The Front also includes political parties Ennahdha, the Karama (Dignity) coalition, Qalb Tounes, Al-Irada and Al-Amal, as well as other parliamentarians, rights activists, independents, and civil society groups.

From the start, the Front adopted a discourse of deep opposition to Saied, portraying all his decisions as illegal and reiterating that Tunisia's 2014 constitution was the "only source of legitimacy". The coalition has since been able to mobilize large numbers of protestors both in the capital Tunis and in the cities of the interior.⁴

When Tunisians overwhelmingly boycotted a first round of parliamentary elections on 17 December 2022, the Front stepped up its rhetoric against Saied, announcing for the first time that it no longer considered him Tunisia's legitimate president and calling on him to step down and hand power to a judge "whose integrity is vouched for", who would then oversee early presidential elections.⁵

Not all of Saied's rivals joined the Front. On 28 September 2021, another alliance was formed under the title "The Coordination of Social Democratic Parties". It included the Democratic Current, the Workers' Party, the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (Ettakatol), and the Republican Party. Some of these parties are seen as having encouraged Saied's moves by calling for a presidential coup against parliament under certain articles of the 2014 constitution, before they realised the gravity of his moves.

The Coordination shares the National Salvation Front's opposition to Saied, seeing his power grab as a coup, but it also blames Ennahdha and its allies for the failures of Tunisia's decade-long democratic transition, and refuses to join them in a formal political structure or protest movement.

The UGTT's Shift from Tacit Support to Opposition

The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the country's powerful trade union federation, initially acquiesced to Saied's 25 July power grab. Its leadership felt that Tunisia's critical political and social situation demanded some form of intervention by the president to "correct the (country's) path". The unions largely refrained from holding strikes similar to those they had repeatedly organised since 2011.

⁴ "The Tunisian National Salvation Front," Al-Jazeera Encyclopedia, 27/7/2022 (accessed 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3WyXuRM>

⁵ "The Tunisian Parliamentary Elections: Adding Fuel to the Fire?" Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 20/12/2022 (accessed 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3GZutsy>



Yet the UGTT's discourse on the government gradually changed after Saied announced his roadmap⁶. The federation boycotted Saied's "dialogue" prior to the referendum on a new constitution, without going as far as rejecting the entire process outright - in contrast to the opposition groups mentioned above. The UGTT suggested a "third option", a proposal that drew mockery from Saied, who said he was not interested in "a third, fourth or fifth option".

As the president continued to push forward alone, including with a string of economic reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund such as removing subsidies on basic goods and services and a public sector hiring freeze, the UGTT stepped up its rhetoric against his policies. However, the federation's leadership tended to blame the administration of Prime Minister Najla Bouden for the deteriorating situation, without mentioning that Saied created the government, hand-picked its ministers (and can sack them), set its policies and oversees its work, as per his presidential decrees and a constitution he wrote.

While the UGTT has blamed Saied's one-man rule for deepening Tunisia's political and economic crises, even threatening to take to the streets to push back against his programme, union leaders have also said they will not work with anyone who describes the 25 July power grab as a "coup" — a reference to the National Salvation Front.

However, the UGTT has said it is in talks with the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), the Bar Association and the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) on "National Salvation Initiative" to be presented to Saied. The UGTT has not revealed details of the plan, but it has implicitly made clear that it does not fit with initiatives that question Saied's legitimacy or see his moves as a "coup".

The federation also limits its opposition to altering the country's current trajectory to "save the country and bring it back to the process of building democracy and institutions, putting it back on the trajectory of development, work and construction, far from all forms of repression or any return to the situation that existed prior to 25 July 2021⁷.

The UGTT rejects any accusation that it is partly to blame for the current situation or that it had a role in crushing Tunisia's democracy by playing along with Saied's policies, or that it had created crises with a string of elected governments, called too many strikes, and blocked laws that would have encouraged investment.

Growing Opposition and the Absence of Consensus

The evidence is mounting that popular support for Saied is rapidly fading from what it was when he orchestrated his constitutional coup against. For more than a year, Tunisians have massively

⁶ "Can Kais Saied Resolve the Crisis in Tunisia?", Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 21/12/2022 (accessed 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3WxbJq3>

⁷ "The statement of the 77: A struggle on all fronts and a national project to exit the current crisis," Echaab News, 20/1/2023 (accessed 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3ZYLY4Z>



boycotted every stage of his roadmap, with turnout for both rounds of parliamentary elections (in December and January) sinking to just over 11 percent.

Most of the political and academic figures who initially supported the president have abandoned him. Political parties that had refrained from taking a position, such as some members of the Coordination, have joined the opposition. The UGTT has become more critical and washed its hands of his one-man programme, warning that it risks dragging the country to disaster.

Meanwhile, Tunisians are struggling with an escalating economic and cost-of-living crisis, to which the government appears to have no realistic solutions, as well as lacking the funds to fill a gaping budget deficit.

Yet Saied shows no sign of giving up his one-man rule or refraining from using the state's security apparatus and the judiciary to settle scores with his political rivals. Most recently, the leadership of the Karama coalition were summoned to military courts and thrown into prison, sparking an outcry among lawyers and rights groups outraged by the irregularities around their trials.

It is clear that opposition to Saied's rule has been boosted by Tunisia's deepening economic crisis, the president's use of the security forces and judiciary against his opponents, his rejection of partnership or compromise and his insistence that the constitutional referendum and elections were successes despite unprecedented boycotts. These factors also suggest that Saied is likely to reject any initiative to find a solution⁸, including the initiative proposed by the UGTT. The union may find itself with few options beyond taking to the streets or holding mass strikes to reassert itself as a key political actor.

Despite the opposition's growth, it remains a hostage of its internal political and ideological rivalries, which have hobbled efforts to reach consensus on a roadmap and a transitional plan to return Tunisia to its democratic path and tackle the collapse of the economy.

Even though a number of factions have united under the banners of the National Salvation Front and the Coordination of Social Democratic Parties respectively, the two coalitions are a long way from working together. This was starkly obvious when the latter cancelled a planned protest in the main street of Tunis to mark the anniversary of the revolution, apparently in order to avoid meeting a similar protest being held by the Front at the same time and place.

Moreover, different opposition factions have set different ceilings for what they are seeking to achieve. While the two political party alliances have both called for Saied's departure (although they differ over the alternatives), the UGTT has so far made do with calling for adjustments within the framework of Saied's overall programme.

⁸ "Many initiatives to resolve the crisis: will Saied respond?", Noon Post, 13/1/2023 (accessed 24/1/2023): <https://bit.ly/3Dbz0Hg>



Conclusion

A year and a half since President Saied launched constitutional coup, ripping up Tunisia's constitution, opposition to his rule is broadening and his social and political support base is falling away. This is fuelled by the escalating economic crisis, the return of repressive policies, the use of state agencies against Saied's political rivals and his dogged one-man rule, including a refusal to partner even with those who initially supported his coup.

This was evidenced in the growth of protest movements, the opposition's mobilising capacity and vast boycotts of the constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections. Yet the president has continued along the path he started in July 2021, making do without popular support and simply relying on the backing of the security services and the army.

The opposition is a captive of its own political and ideological divisions and remains unable to agree on a plan to drag Tunisia back to the path of democratic transition. The UGTT is hesitant to take a firm position and has so far limited itself to demanding alterations within Saied's overall programme. The potential consequences could be grave. The deteriorating social and economic situation could spark mass street protests, which could in turn lead to violent clashes with security forces.