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Tunisia's Growing Social Discontent: Drivers, Dynamics, and Prospects

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Electricity Crisis: Losses and Questions 1

Short-Term Malfunction or Structural Crisis? 2

Crisis on the Street 2

A Creeping Crisis 3

Sectoral Crises or a Crisis of Government? 4

A catalyst for demands for change 5

Conclusion 5

Introduction

Mid-July 2026 saw significant demonstrations in Tunisia protesting repeated power cuts and interruptions to the supply of drinking water. These demonstrations, which coincided with the fifth anniversary of President Kais Saied's self-coup, took place against the backdrop of a political, social and economic crisis – a crisis that the regime has met with a dogged refusal to cede power, an increasing crackdown on civil liberties, attacks on activists, journalists, and businessmen, and further backsliding from the gains of the 2011 revolution.

Electricity Crisis: Losses and Questions

In mid-July 2026, Tunisia found itself in the grip of a major heatwave. Although high temperatures are nothing unusual at this time of year, there was something different about summer 2026: the heatwave coincided with significant disruptions to the electricity supply. For the first time ever, regions throughout Tunisia experienced repeated, daily power cuts, lasting for hours at a time. With no electricity flowing to homes, hospitals, offices, factories or farms: patients died in their beds, the poultry industry suffered huge losses, frozen and chilled products rotted in the heat, production lines ground to a halt, and administrative services were suspended entirely.¹ The disruption to the grid had knock-on effects on the system supplying drinking water. Damage to pumping and distribution stations left many cities and neighbourhoods without access to water for days or even, in some regions, weeks.

The situation was exacerbated by more than a week of near-total government silence on the crisis. The state power company, STEG – the country's sole official producer and supplier of electricity – notified its customers that there would be rolling power outages across various cities and neighbourhoods in order to “ensure the safety and continued operability of the grid,” but made no broader statement.² Ten days after the crisis began, the President belatedly informed Tunisians that “the current water and power outages... are not normal phenomena, and the state will not stand back and watch as others seek to incite the people and inflame the situation” – and that “no attempt at incitement, whatever its origin and no matter how vicious, can overcome the great awareness of the Tunisian people.”³ He provided no explanation of what he meant by “incitement” or what its link might be to the ongoing power cuts.

¹ Ali al-Qassemi, “Power cuts in Tunisia... heatwave exposes weakness of power grid”, *Al Jazeera*, 31/07/2026, accessed on 05/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2ta0>

² STEG, “Notification of power outages”, Facebook, accessed on 06/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2ta0>

³ Presidency of the Republic of Tunisia, 23/07/2026, accessed on 06/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2smd>

Short-Term Malfunction or Structural Crisis?

The current crisis is the first of its kind. The country has never previously experienced such extensive disruptions to the electricity supply: outages have always been an unusual occurrence and limited in scope. There has still been no official, detailed explanation of what happened, although the STEG notices imply that the aim of the rolling blackouts is so-called “load-shedding” and that cutting off particular areas is the only way of preventing complete breakdown of the grid.

It seems clear that power generation cannot currently meet consumer demand, which is always at its highest during the summer and in the middle of heatwaves. But such a large shortfall in supply is unprecedented, and the crisis is ongoing – albeit with less intensity – despite the fact that the heatwave has passed and the temperature has fallen.

This is not simply a short-term malfunction and cannot be fixed by alluding in populist fashion to shadowy forces seeking to undermine the government. It requires an objective diagnosis of the sources of the problem, a forward-looking approach, and medium- and long-term planning. It requires sufficient funding, upgrading of dilapidated infrastructure, investment in alternative energies, and a serious strategy for energy security in an unstable region with a fluctuating global market and continuing price rises.

Crisis on the Street

With no electricity and no drinking water, and amid radio silence from the government, nighttime demonstrations soon began in a handful of cities in the southeast. It was not long before they spread to most areas of the country. Demonstrators set tyres on fire and blocked roads, demanding improved services and access to electricity and water. Despite the growth of the protests, there were no significant clashes with the security forces, who kept a close eye on the situation but did not intervene. Force was used in only a few cases, in working-class neighbourhoods in the capital and other big cities.

During the spontaneous nighttime protests, the slogans did not go beyond basic demands for improved services and condemnation of government absence despite the seriousness of the crisis. However, there was a notable escalation on 25 July, the fifth anniversary of the Kais Saied coup. At a demonstration organized by the Nafs Movement, a pro-democracy and human rights defender civil initiative largely made up of young activists, protesters chanted slogans such as “Saied out!” (*irha!l*) and “the people want the fall of the regime!” The demonstration was well-attended, especially by young people, and also featured many prominent party and independent figures from across the political and ideological spectrum – brought together for the first time by the “chaos in government”.

They called for Saied to step down, for prisoners to be released, for a return to democratization, and for the problems with public services to be addressed.⁴

A Creeping Crisis

Although it is perhaps the most serious in terms of its effects on the day-to-day lives of Tunisians, the electricity crisis is not the first living standards crisis faced by the country since Saied's power grab in 2021. There have been many others – some of which are ongoing, albeit at a lower intensity. For example, there have been shortages of flour and other consumer goods (vegetable oil, sugar and coffee, for example). More broadly, the cost of consumer goods has risen dramatically. Between 2021 and 2026, the price of red meat has tripled,⁵ while those of vegetables and grains have also seen significant rises.⁶

Nor have these crises been limited to the supply of foodstuffs. They have also affected medication.⁷ There have been serious shortages of various medicines, including those used to treat a number of chronic conditions and cancers. This has coincided with the deterioration of service quality in public hospitals, and pharmacies' decision to end their previous agreements with the National Sickness Insurance Fund (CNAM) because of its failure to meet its obligations to them.

At the same time, most public enterprises have been struggling, amid rising debts, a lack of funding, mismanagement and underinvestment – making it difficult for them to meet their obligations. Many of these enterprises provide vital services to citizens: water, energy and electricity, public transport, railways, Tunisair, the Central Pharmacy and the Seed Bank.

To be sure, these are complex, structural crises whose roots go back far beyond the Saied presidency – in some cases, to political and economic decisions made many decades ago. However, the statistics show that they have got much worse since the President assumed dictatorial powers, abolished the role of the “intermediary entities” (parties, unions and other organizations), reduced the parliament to a rubber stamp, marginalized skilled administrators, cracked down on business, and adopted a populist rhetoric that blames every crisis on “traitors”, “foreign agents”, “thieves” and “conspirators”.

4 “Five years after his ‘extraordinary measures’... demonstrators call for Kais Saied to go”, *Al Jazeera*, 26/07/2026, accessed on 06/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2sTJ>

5 National Institute of Statistics, January 2021 Monthly Statistical Bulletin, accessed on 07/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2sTp>; Iman Al-Hamdi, “Tunisia: meat prices cross all red lines, kilo at 30 dollars”, *Alaraby Aljadeed*, 26/05/2026, accessed on 07/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2sD8>

6 See for example: National Institute of Statistics, July 2026 Family Consumption Prices Index, press release, accessed on 07/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2smx>

7 Sameh Gharsalli, “Pharmaceutical sector governance in Tunis: when the state fails to guarantee the right to life”, *Alqatiba*, 30/06/2026, accessed on 07/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2t9G>; Khamis Ben Brik, “Tunisia medicine shortage provokes criticism, worsens patient suffering”, *Al Jazeera*, 02/09/2026, accessed on 07/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2smR>

Sectoral Crises or a Crisis of Government?

The various crises in service provision and the economy overlap with one another and are effectively inseparable. The electricity crisis cannot therefore be separated from the broader political context of the last five years and the populist narratives that paved the way for President Saïed's coup against the constitution: restrictions on party activity, diminished parliamentary oversight, marginalization of elites, empty promises of an end to corruption and reinvestment of the “billions of billions” stolen by politicians and businessmen to achieve development and prosperity in marginalized areas. This sort of rhetoric may be able to demolish old structures, but it is incapable of building anything new.

Throughout five years of autocratic rule, the oversight bodies enshrined in the constitution have been dissolved without any new institutions taking their place (the Supreme Judicial Council, the Access to Information Commission, the National Anticorruption Commission, municipal assemblies, etc). As prices have risen at unprecedented rates and the black market in consumer goods has exploded, traditional producers and distributors have been boycotted in the name of combatting monopolists and speculators, prominent businessmen and politicians have been imprisoned, and a “Penal Reconciliation Commission” has been set up to claw back “stolen funds”. But none of this has fixed the deficit or helped drive development in the marginalized regions.⁸ The promises have come thick and fast: vast “medical cities”, high-speed trains connecting the country's north and south. But none of this has materialized. All that one-man rule has achieved is a series of major crises in transport and health, as well as education, agriculture, industry and energy.⁹

The deterioration of public services, President Saïed's inability to keep his promises, and the ever-growing list of those targeted for harassment and legal action have shrunk the support base he enjoyed in 2021. Some previously friendly parties and organizations (the Popular Movement, the Tunisian General Labour Union, the Tunisian Human Rights League, etc) have moved gradually towards the opposition. At the same time, popular support for the President has receded – which has been made particularly obvious by the lacklustre attendance at demonstrations organized by his supporters in the capital.

Declining living standards, worsening service provision, and the needs created by these two problems show that the crisis in Tunisia is more complicated than the accounts given by Saïed and his pet social media pages would suggest. These accounts seek to absolve the government of any responsibility for the crisis by deploying a populist rhetoric that ignores the problem rather than addressing it head on. The mounting crises that Tunisia is facing are all symptoms of a broader crisis of government. And since there is no indication that the government is likely to change its political ways, and little evidence that it is capable of addressing the problems themselves, they are only likely to get worse. Moreover – with its claim to electoral legitimacy already seriously undermined

⁸ Samih Beji Okkez, “How Saïed made Penal Reconciliation a hostage to populist promises”, *Nawaat*, 24/06/2026, accessed on 10/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2sDs>

⁹ “SaïedMeter: the results of seven years of rule”, I Watch Organisation, 06/08/2026, accessed on 10/08/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2sU3>

by much-reduced turnout since the coup – they raise questions about the government's claim to a legitimacy based on delivery.

A catalyst for demands for change

With the high point of the electricity crisis behind us, the demonstrations have got smaller and fewer in number – for now. But the nature of the crises that the country is experiencing augur further difficulties in the near future, difficulties that may be no less severe than that of mid-July. The beginning of the new school year in September always sees significant price rises, which is likely to put serious pressure on families and on the public bodies that are supposed to provide transport, energy, health and educational services. At the same time, the government seems to have few options for overcoming these crises. All this promises further periodic waves of popular protest and increasing mobilization – not least given the first signs of a new convergence between different political and youth groups calling for Saied's removal and a return to democracy.

Conclusion

The most recent electricity crisis is not the only crisis that has faced Tunisia since President Saied seized power in 2021. However, it has been more serious and had a greater effect on the dilapidated Tunisian economy and on the daily lives of citizens than those that preceded it – which explains the scale of the popular protests that it triggered and the extent to which it has united a range of social groups behind the demand for a new government that will restart the democratic transition.

With a government incapable of addressing these various crises and a President intent on sticking to his policy of one-man rule and populist crisis management, with no constitutional solutions available, and with the traditional political forces unable – for the moment, at least – to regain their vitality, all indications point to fresh crises in the near future and growing popular unrest as a result.