

Democracy Promotion No Longer? Autocratic Diffusion and Economic Barriers to Democratic Consolidation in Tunisia

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Abstract: The crisis of democracy in Tunisia continues, as President Kais Saied declared an indefinite suspension of parliament, which he has depicted as a threat to the state. Amidst this crisis, the indecisive attitude of international democratic actors has disappointed many and created a power vacuum for MENA strongmen to extend their political influence on Tunisia. This piece draws attention to the important role international actors played in consolidating democracy in past democratic transitions. However, the EU and the US failed to assume this role throughout the transition period in Tunisia and avoided strongly denouncing Saied's takeover. This inaction deprived Tunisian democratic actors of the necessary financial and technical assistance to address Tunisia's administrative deficiencies which reflected itself in declining income levels and increasing disillusionment. Without external democracy promotion, Tunisia became more fragile to autocratic diffusion.

1. Introduction

Seven weeks after his executive takeover on July 25, 2021, President Kais Saied announced his intention to change the constitution in a television broadcast to the Tunisian people. He emphasized that the 2014 constitution was not "eternal" and could be amended.¹ His call for extensive amendments met immediate rejection from the Ennahda party and the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), both of which viewed the move as a retreat from democracy.² These concerns regarding the future of Tunisian democracy are not groundless as the President also declared the indefinite suspension of parliament, despite passing a previous 30-day deadline enshrined in the constitutional article he used to legitimate his takeover. This means that the parliament will remain shut for an undetermined time throughout which all legislative, judicial, and executive powers will remain Saied's prerogative. However, what truly worried many observers was his portrayal of parliament as "a threat to the state,"³ thereby reducing the possibility of a peaceful transition in the future.

It is highly likely that Saied's amendments will drive the country towards a more authoritarian direction, and that the electoral law and administrative institutions will be reconfigured in counter-majoritarian ways to balance the national will in future elections. Currently, President Saied feels confident given the popular support he enjoys and thus extended parliament's

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suspension to buy more time to finalize his roadmap.⁴ The previously announced 30-day suspension was simply a transition period for people to grow accustomed to the new situation and dilute the possible reactions to his full-blown authoritarian turn. He is aware of the public's fatigue with the economic problems and corruption scandals of the last decade and knows that to a large extent Tunisia's populace is not concerned with violations of checks and balances, but rather expect him to improve economic conditions and purge corruption. In short, recent developments demonstrate that the domestic environment presents pro-democratic actors with several drawbacks. Could international democratic actors mitigate the inhospitable domestic environment to democracy? Should Tunisian democratic actors expect more from external actors?

Democratic actors across the world largely remained passive observers of the situation in Tunisia. The European Union (EU) and the United States (US) only expressed their "concerns" regarding the "situation" while mostly avoiding making any strong denouncements of Saied's executive takeover.⁵ Their statements emphasized the need to restore constitutional order and maintain parliamentary activity without referring to individuals behind the crisis. Several analysts viewed these statements as hollow and toothless responses.⁶ Can Tunisian democracy survive and consolidate despite the absence of global democratic endorsement?

President Saied legitimized his intervention by referring to the declining economy and increasing disillusionment. Nevertheless, by providing financial and technical assistance to democratic actors over the last decade, the international community could have played a constructive role in strengthening democracy in Tunisia as the deteriorating economic conditions and pervasive corruption would be less likely to pose challenges to the consolidation of democracy. In order to appease the public, which is mostly concerned with the general living standards, and the anti-democratic elites who might have vested interests in the country's economic growth, a stable economic performance is critical to any democratic regime's survival and consolidation. Especially during periods of transition, increasing wealth provides new democratic regimes with the necessary support from the masses and old elites, thereby eliminating potential threats to the democratic transition process. When these conditions are not met, young democracies rarely survive.

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This piece places the recent crisis of Tunisian democracy in a wider context and discusses the factors beyond domestic causes that brought its democracy to the verge of breakdown. It first tackles the issue of democracy promotion and analyzes the ways in which international democratic actors failed to serve as democratic anchors for post-2011 Tunisia. This brief then focuses on the political economy of democratic transitions and identifies structural barriers to consolidating democracy in the case of Tunisia.

2. A Theoretical Overview of Democracy Promotion

In a previous piece, I drew attention to the historical institutional legacies that constrained post-transition actors in Tunisia in their attempt to consolidate democracy.⁷ However, the history of democratic transitions across the world shows us that democratic transition and consolidation are still possible despite the legacy of repressive regimes. Hence, instead of concentrating exclusively on the internal dynamics while studying regime change, democratization scholars can benefit from focusing on transnational efforts at democracy promotion as exemplified in the case of democratic transition in the post-Soviet countries.

The EU, US, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and international non-governmental organizations, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, were all critical actors in promoting and consolidating democracy across Eastern and Central European countries following the culmination of the Cold War.

The NDI promoted the development of political parties in these newly transitioning democracies by providing them with operational and electoral assistance and educating new party staff and members. It made substantial contributions to party development and produced organizationally strong parties which effectively aggregated and articulated citizens' interests and professionally planned and monitored electoral campaigns.⁸ Party building through external assistance thus proved critical to restoring public trust in political institutions in post-Communist countries.

The EU's financial assistance enhanced regional democracy by empowering pro-democratic elites, promoting civil society activism, and establishing checks on regional governance.⁹

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The EU aid mitigated the Soviet era's autocratic legacy by providing regional actors with alternative sources of funding and enabling regional politicians' socialization in democratic values. The EU's emphasis on democracy encouraged civil society actors and regional political actors to be more tolerant of political pluralism. Furthermore, the EU's financial democracy assistance invested in civic education programs and supported human right activists within the host country to generate a democratic sub-culture.¹⁰

For its part, US foreign policy for decades put a strong emphasis on democracy promotion. The Clinton administration prioritized strengthening democracy across the world to make the world "safer" and enable every person in the world to live under a democratic system.¹¹ This approach was later embraced by President Bush who declared that "the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."¹² Most recently, following the populism of the Trump administration, the US presidential office showed its commitment to return to democracy promotion once more as President Biden identified democratic retreat, usually by elected executives who seek to undermine electoral or constitutional constraints on their rule, as one of the major challenges to global politics.¹³

The abovementioned commitment to democracy promotion allowed democratic states to react strongly to perceived threats against democratic transitions. They employed instruments of soft power by sending diplomatic envoys consisting of ministers and high-ranking officials to the centers of crisis. Such interventions indicate efforts beyond simply issuing statements and illustrate sincere disapproval towards the suspension of democratic activities. International democratic actors tend to opt for harsher responses when diplomatic tools fail, including not hesitating to cut the flow of financial aid that explicitly require 'democratic governance' as a condition for continuing financial assistance. In the past, even harsher responses included targeted sanctions without incurring humanitarian costs.

However, democratic actors clearly failed to employ these instruments in the case of Tunisia. Instead, immediate responses did not go beyond emphasizing concerns over the takeover and timidly urging President Saied to return to constitutional order as soon as possible. A statement made by Josep Borrell on behalf of the EU's 27 countries stressed the importance of avoiding all forms of violence.¹⁴ Similarly, the US Secretary of State Blinken tweeted that he encouraged Saied to respect democracy and human rights and maintain dialogue with politicians and the Tunisian people.¹⁵

3. International Passivity and Democratic Decay

The democratic camp in Tunisia, including Ennahda, and international observers expected more from the EU and US. The Ennahda politician and the former youth and sports minister Ahmed Gaaloul was highly disappointed with the “hollow” criticisms of Saied and voiced Tunisia’s need for a stronger and firmer attitude from those “who defend democracy and human rights.”¹⁶ Other analysts found EU’s response puzzling given the aid the EU provided to the post-2011 Tunisian governments and hence, expected the union to abandon the “wait and see” approach and pursue a more proactive role in denouncing President Saied.¹⁷ Similar to the EU, the US monetary contribution to Tunisia since the revolution of 2011 has reached nearly \$700 million most of which was directed to promoting civil society and democratic activism as well as enhancing good governance and fiscal transparency.¹⁸ Why would these actors avoid taking a harsher stance against Saied’s executive takeover after making investments in Tunisia’s democratic transition?

A brief glimpse into the international politics of the last decade can help us to understand the US and the EU’s indecisive attitudes. The US’ commitment to promotion of liberal values began to fade with the Obama administration, reaching its nadir under the administration of former President Donald Trump who embodied the rising global populism. On several occasions, he used a highly derogatory language towards Third World countries while promoting China as one of his foreign policy priorities. In addition to a deteriorating democracy at their home, US policymakers simply lacked the legitimacy and tools necessary to promote democracy abroad. The increasing political polarization and spread of authoritarian values under the Trump administration prevented the US from assuming its previous international position. The question is whether Biden will continue to show similar tolerance towards authoritarian leaders and ignore the democratic crisis in Tunisia.

The EU’s political agenda over the last decade was highly occupied by similar political intricacies such as the rise of far right and Brexit. These two phenomena were highly associated with the rising anti-EU/immigrant/elitist sentiments which challenged the union’s democratic values and institutions. As a result, the EU and its leading states, including Germany and France, failed to assume a conciliatory role in regional crises such as the Libyan, Syrian, and Ukrainian civil wars. The EU also considerably failed in its approach towards the Syrian refugee crisis thus damaging its humanitarian values. The democratic transition in Tunisia simply was not a primary consideration for the EU which was being seriously tested by its own internal crises.

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The lack of significant external assistance made it difficult for Tunisian democratic administration to surpass the structural barriers to democratic consolidation such as declining wealth and increasing corruption. The question is would Tunisian democracy have survived following the 2011 revolution if the country had received significant financial and technical support from international actors including the US, EU, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank? It is highly difficult to present a definitive answer, but one can certainly argue that democratic actors in the country would certainly be better off if they had received sufficient aid for the post-revolution transition.

Democracy promotion involves employing certain policy instruments such as visa and trade liberalization to enhance bilateral trade, technical assistance regarding economic governance, improving higher education, reforms in public bureaucracy, and funding for civil society¹⁹ to help post-transition countries institutionalize democracy. It is difficult to say that Tunisia received comprehensive foreign aid following the 2011 revolution. Figure 1 shows that postrevolutionary governments in Tunisia failed considerably in terms of lifting general living standards as the GDP per capita drastically declined following 2011. Ironically, democracy made Tunisia poorer on average. A vast literature in political science already shows us why maintaining a stable economy is critical for democracies' survival since the early 20th century.²⁰ Tunisia was no exception, and declining income level certainly played a role in demise of its democracy.

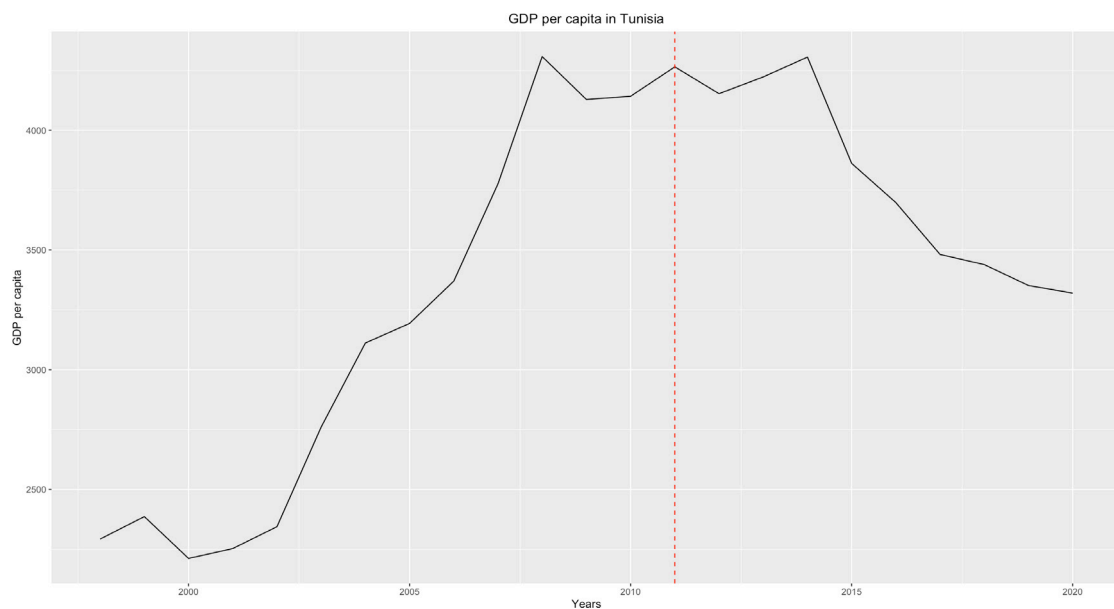


Figure 1: GDP per capita in Tunisia between 1998-2020, Source: The World Bank.²¹ The red dashed line separates the pre- and post-revolutionary periods.

Figure 2 demonstrates the pervasive nature of corruption in the country before and after the democratic revolution of 2011. Corruption is usually a clandestine activity and thus hard to quantify with data, but the general perception of corruption among domestic experts, academics, and journalists can be an effective way to understand the extent of corruption. The data from the Corruption Perception Index demonstrates that post-revolutionary governments performed poorly in addressing economic disillusionment. As a result, corruption became an even more destabilizing political problem when coincided with bad economic governance. The declining income level and higher levels of perception of corruption show that post-revolutionary governments proved inefficacious in crucial ways. When their administrative inexperience and inadequacy were not compensated with financial and technical assistance from international democratic actors, Tunisian democratic governments became vulnerable to anti-democratic attacks.

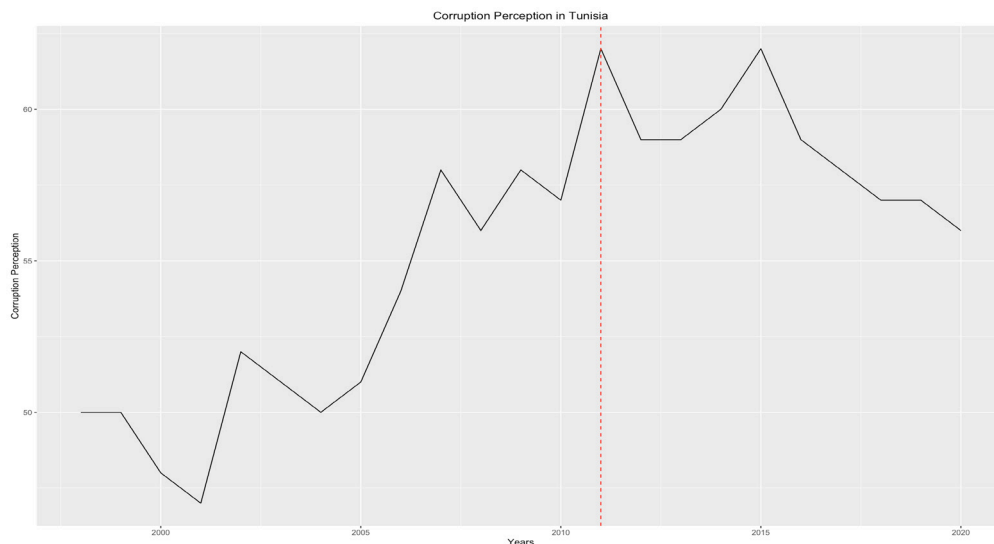


Figure 2: The Corruption Perception in Tunisia between 1998-2020, Source: The Corruption Perception Index.²² The data ranges from 0 (no corruption) to 100 (full corruption). The red dashed line separates the pre- and post-revolutionary periods.

4. Autocratic Diffusion?

The indecisive attitude embraced by the current US administration and EU countries towards the democratic crisis in Tunisia is not only in strong contradiction with their previously stated commitment to democracy, but also opens space for authoritarian MENA governments to expand their political influence over countries such as Tunisia which are embroiled with political instability. In other words, the EU and US' indecisive policy towards Saied's executive takeover creates a power vacuum to be filled by regional authoritarian actors.

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Kais Saied's takeover was already celebrated by the autocratic trio of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.²³ The leading media outlets in the Gulf region openly shared their happiness on the alleged defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁴ After all, Saied's power grab represented the collapse of the only successful case of democratic transition since the Arab Spring and one which hosted a powerful Islamist political party with strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Considering the lack of reprisal from either EU or the US, it is more likely that we are going to witness authoritarian diffusion than democracy promotion.

It is not surprising that MENA strongmen warmly welcome the executive takeover given their deep-rooted animosity towards Ennahda which they see as the Tunisian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the "trojan horse" of Islamist political expansion.²⁵ Officials from the trio declared their support for Saied's dismissal of the parliament while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have reportedly promised an aid package of \$5 billion to facilitate his takeover.²⁶ Saied viewed their support as "brotherly and friendly"²⁷ which suggests further rapprochement between the autocratic trio and Tunisia and the increasing influence of Arab dictators throughout the MENA region. The alleged financial aid from Gulf countries may prove highly useful for Saied to stabilize authoritarian rule by effectively providing public goods, appeasing elite dissidents by distributing rents, and buying off potential elite rivals and thus making defections more costly.

The autocratic diffusion is a realistic scenario not only because the possible financial aid from oil-rich authoritarian countries would play into Saied's hands, but also because of Tunisia's geographic disadvantage. Democratization literature demonstrates that countries cannot democratize in isolation. In other words, democratic neighbors matter. Geographically, Tunisia is surrounded by non-democratic countries which minimized the chances for exchanging experience on democratic governance and diffusion through information and learning.²⁸ Instead, Tunisia was neighbored by politically unstable countries and oil-rich monarchs which were hostile to the growing Islamic political activism within the country.

Tunisia was physically surrounded by authoritarian regimes and thus has a non-conducive geography to consolidate democracy

5. Conclusion

Democracy promotion is no longer an appealing foreign policy priority for the US and EU as shown by the case of Tunisia. The US lost its democratic prestige and international legitimacy under the Trump administration and abandoned its previous policy of advancing liberal democracies abroad. Due to its tumultuous internal political environment during the last decade, the EU too found it difficult to play a critical role in regional crises. As a result, international democratic actors proved incompetent in actively promoting democracy in Tunisia which suffered from administrative deficiencies and thus struggled with declining income level and high levels of corruption. Therefore, Tunisian people and democratic actors in the country should have more realistic expectations from external actors.

Tunisia was physically surrounded by authoritarian regimes and thus has a non-conducive geography to consolidate democracy. This absence of democracy promotion paved the way for a larger playground for the autocratic trio to extend their political influence while lowering the odds for the reinstatement of democratic parliamentary activity in Tunisia. The MENA strongmen further contributed to democratic decay in the country by financially supporting Saied's new regime. As a result, authoritarian rule in the MENA seems to once more be resurgent.

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