

THE ROAD TO JULY 25: THE PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN TUNISIA

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Abstract: The Tunisian democratic experiment, once the last remaining hope of the Arab revolts, was put to an end on July 25, 2021, as President Kais Saied announced the dissolution of government and the freezing of parliament. This article goes beyond the immediate factors of Saied's authoritarian take-over to discuss the background conditions that prepared the stage for July 25. It argues that there are two main conditions that led to this outcome. First, like many other countries that have experienced democratic transitions, Tunisia suffered from major obstacles in the way of democratic consolidation. Even with the post-revolutionary development of Tunisian civil society and the flourishing of a multitude of political parties and organizations, the institutional routinization necessary for democratic consolidation still could not take place. This institutional weakness led to an absence of horizontal accountability. Alongside these political problems, the democratic experiment failed to meet economic expectations. Second, as a result of these political and economic challenges, the Tunisian public grew disillusioned with democracy. The lack of democratic consolidation and the public's subsequent frustration with the democratic experiment created conditions under which democracy could be undermined.

Introduction

As the hopes for genuine democratic change started to wane across the region following the first two years of the Arab revolts, Tunisia remained the only hope to continue its path to democratization. With the second free, fair, and competitive elections in late 2013 and the completion of the constitution in early 2014, Tunisia successfully completed its democratic transition. Yet, recent history has showed us once more that while democratic transition is an important milestone, it is not the endpoint, as the tumultuous years of political, economic, and security problems set the stage for Kais Saied's takeover on July 2021.

Much has been written to successfully explain how and why Saied could take over and terminate (this stage of) the democratic experiment in Tunisia.¹ What then were the conditions that prepared the stage for Saied's takeover? Why couldn't Tunisia consolidate its democracy despite multiple governments taking power for over a decade after the transition?² In other words, what brought Tunisian democracy to July 25?

Tunisia is not unique in experiencing problems in democratic consolidation after a successful transition. The literature produced on Latin America and Eastern Europe during the 1990s is quite illuminating to understand the Tunisian case. As these regions transitioned to democracy during what is called the Third Wave of democratization, over the following decade many

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realized that the results were far from what they had hoped for. Some even argued that there needed to be a second transition, this time into a consolidated democracy.³ Therefore, scholars turned their focus away from democratic transitions to democratic consolidation and even breakdown. Some attributed the lack of consolidation to the prior regimes or the modes of transition,⁴ while others focused on the post-transition developments.⁵

Following this literature, this article focuses on two aspects of the Tunisian experience after its democratic transition. First, Tunisian democracy, like many of its predecessors, was not successful in meeting the institutional and socioeconomic conditions necessary to consolidate a democratic system. Second, the Tunisian public consequently grew disillusioned with the democratic experiment, providing Saied and other actors an easy path to undermine democracy in the country.

Examining the problems of democratic consolidation and the public's subsequent disillusionment can help us to understand the background of Tunisia's current democratic breakdown. On the one hand, this shows us which aspects will be important to determine whether Saied will be perceived as successful in the eyes of the Tunisian public over the upcoming months. On the other hand, it can also aid us in understanding what the critical points will be if the democratic experiment restarts in Tunisia one day.

The Problems of Consolidation in Tunisia

In their seminal work, Linz and Stepan explain consolidation as democracy being the only game in town. Thus, it does not necessarily mean the system must become a liberal democracy, like in Western European nations. Rather, a democratic regime is considered consolidated if the main actors embrace democracy and do not pose a serious threat to overthrow it. To consolidate democracy, they argue, five conditions should be met: There must be a (1) free civil society including rights and freedoms, (2) a strong political society with actors and procedures, (3) rule of law, (4) a functioning bureaucracy to serve the democratic government, and (5) what they call an economic society.⁶ While the first four of these relate to the institutional conditions necessary for a democracy's consolidation, the fifth one relates to socioeconomic conditions, which are often overlooked in analyses of democratic consolidation.

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The lack of democratic consolidation in Tunisia can be traced through these five conditions. The most salient gains of the transition in Tunisia were observed in civil society and the political institutions. Thanks to the regime change, Tunisia established a vibrant civil society,⁷ despite all its problems,⁸ and established a political system with parties, elections, and legislature. The mere establishment of such institutions, however, is insufficient for consolidation, as actors should also habituate to the norms and procedures of democratic rule.

During the transition process, Tunisian elites sought to implement what is called consensus politics and tried to make decisions through consensus rather than taking majoritarian practices. While reaching absolute consensus was not possible, these attempts were successful at several stages of transition, such as the formation of the Troika government, the Consensus Committee of the constitution writing process and the eventual National Dialogue. While consensus politics helped Tunisian actors in the transition to democracy, overly relying on consensus later actually had a detrimental impact on Tunisian democratic consolidation. The insistence on consensus politics through national unity governments after 2014 and the ever increasing disagreements among major political actors created multiple problems. The Tunisian elites experienced difficulties in forming stable governments, overcoming deadlocks, taking bold actions in the economy, forming a constitutional court, and finding solutions to controversial issues like transitional justice.⁹ Consequently, these problems obstructed the institutional routinization necessary for consolidation. Moreover, given that the state bureaucracy in Tunisia could not be widely reformed, state institutions, from security apparatuses to the anti-corruption agency among others, could not help the democratic governments to establish the rule of law.¹⁰

As a result of this institutional weakness, Tunisia during its democratic experiment significantly lacked what is termed horizontal accountability. While vertical accountability refers to accountability through elections, which was successfully achieved in Tunisia, horizontal accountability refers to the presence of checks and balances across autonomous state institutions and actors in a democracy.¹¹ While the lack of horizontal accountability led to strong-men governments or leaders undermining democracy in other cases,¹² in Tunisia it

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was in fact the lack of strong government that hurt democracy. In the absence of horizontal accountability and the rule of law, the Tunisian people could not enjoy the political benefits of the democratic experiment despite their expanding political rights.

The final condition for democratic consolidation, the socioeconomic situation, was another major obstacle in Tunisia. Even though the literature suggests that economic development helps democracies to survive,¹³ Third Wave scholars paid less attention to socioeconomic conditions in order to avoid conflating the institutional design of democratic systems with the economic consequences of transition.¹⁴ Nevertheless, they argued that socioeconomic problems affect the stability of new democracies¹⁵ and poor economic conditions inherited from the ancien régime prevent the foundation of a socioeconomic pact between the state and the people.¹⁶ This was evident in Tunisia during the decade after the transition. Economic development had been promoted as a strong suit of the Ben Ali regime. After the transition, the expected positive impact on the economy did not come to pass, however, as the Tunisian dinar lost its value, inflation remained high, unemployment increased and investments and tourism slowed down.¹⁷ Furthermore, the already existing corruption in Tunisia became even more widespread. As often argued, even corruption was democratized after the transition, as it no longer remained limited to a small circle of elites.¹⁸

The Democratic Experiment and Disappointments

As seen, the inability to meet the conditions for democratic consolidation led to disappointing outcomes in both the political and socioeconomic spheres. This is where the role of the people comes back in. Democratic transitions or breakdowns are institutional processes that are most often carried out by elites. Nevertheless, the people can still play a significant role in driving these processes. While it was the elite and institution building over the following years that completed the democratic transition process, it was the people who sparked the process. In a similar vein, the Tunisian public's understandable frustration with the democratic experiment provided the justification and opportunity for Saïed and like-minded elites to subvert democracy.

Disillusionment with democracy is also not unique to the Tunisian experience. People in many new democracies in Latin America and Eastern Europe also partially lost their support for democracy during the 1990s and 2000s as well.¹⁹ Several studies show a similar stark

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decline in support for democracy in Tunisia.²⁰ In fact, surveys carried out across the region show that Tunisia had one of the most significant declines in support for democracy during this period in comparison to other nations.

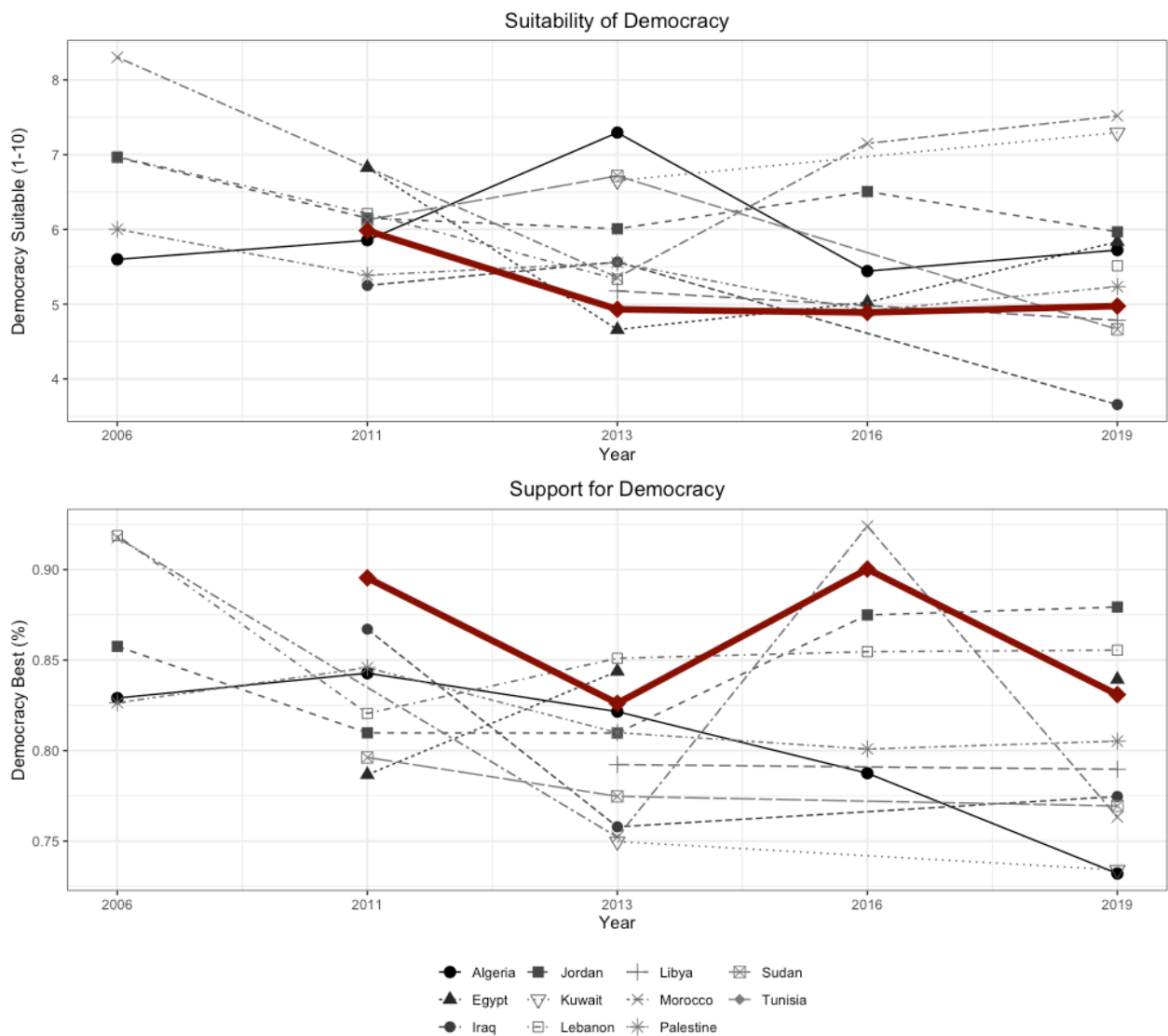


Figure 1: Changes in Support for Democracy (Arab Barometer Waves 1 to 5)

Figure 1 illustrates a small sample of what the studies argue, based on five waves of the Arab Barometer surveys.²¹ The top plot shows how many citizens see democracy as suitable for their

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country. In Tunisia, shown in dark red, there is a stark decline after 2011 and the averages remained toward the lower end of the region throughout the decade. The bottom plot shows whether the respondents think democracy is a better political system than alternatives. While the respondents across the region answer this question quite positively, the changes in Tunisia are quite striking. Despite a recovery in 2016, there was a significant decrease in support for democracy after 2011. These charts show that Tunisians, just like the rest of the region, are quite supportive of democracy. In fact, more than 80% of Tunisians still believe that democracy is better than its alternatives. However, in comparative terms, Tunisians are not as supportive of democracy as they were at the beginning of the revolution. More specifically, a lower percentage of people believe that democracy is a suitable system for their country.

Conclusion

The reason for people's skepticism towards democracy lies in the problems of consolidation explained above. The revolution had promised significant changes for Tunisia and its people. As such, Tunisians expected a democratic system to not only bring freedoms, but also economic development, order and stability, and political development. As Tunisia's democracy faced challenges in its consolidation, the democratic experiment could not fulfill political and socioeconomic expectations, and could not, therefore, offer a new political and socioeconomic pact between the state and the people. Consequently, Tunisians started to attach positive outcomes to democracy to a lesser degree, leading to a decline in support for democracy.²² In short, the Tunisian people did not believe the lackluster results to be what they had signed up for when they had started the revolution a decade prior, leading them to become disillusioned with the democratic experiment.

This piece aimed to explain why democracy was subverted in Tunisia by looking at the problems of consolidation. Tunisia was undoubtedly the success story of the Arab revolts over the last decade. Yet, the democratic experiment had numerous shortcomings. While the lack of democratic consolidation due to problems in institutional and socioeconomic

conditions and the populace's subsequent disillusionment are important for explaining the current situation, we should see these as merely background factors for the current outcome and avoid deterministic statements. These factors did not make the end of democracy in Tunisia inevitable, as many democratic experiments in several Latin American, Eastern European, and Sub-Saharan African nations persevered despite facing similar problems in democratic consolidation. Tunisia's democracy, likewise, could have continued despite all its problems and may yet continue. As Tunisia enters 2022 with so many uncertainties, it remains yet to be seen if Tunisia will one day return to democratic politics.

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- 22- On average, Tunisians are still fairly supportive of democracy and the average support in Tunisia is still higher than other Arab nations, per the studies cited. However, compared with the beginning of the revolution, there still is a significant decline.

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