

Tunisian president assumes dictatorial powers amid deepening social unrest

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Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed dissolved parliament last week, after more than half its members voted to repeal the draconian powers he had given himself after mounting a coup last July.

The powers included the suspension of parliament, the designation of ministers and chairing of the meetings of the council of ministers, the use of presidential decrees to pass legislation and dissolution in February of the Supreme Judicial Council that deals with judicial independence and assumption of control over the selection and promotion of judges.

Saïed's latest move was made against a vote that while not legally binding is the most open sign yet of the bitter infighting within Tunisia's political elite. It sets the stage for an intensification of the country's political and economic crisis.

Last year he sacked the Islamist Ennahda Party government, suspended parliament, stripped legislators of parliamentary immunity and deployed the military to guard state buildings. This followed months of protests over police brutality, economic hardship and the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic that has killed more than 28,000 people of the country's 12 million population. He went on television to warn that the military would not hesitate to use force against those who opposed his coup, a clear threat to the working class.

Saïed banned dozens of judges, politicians and businessmen from traveling and put others under house arrest. He shut down the National Anti-Corruption Authority and sidelined the Independent High Authority for Elections. He appointed Najila Bouden, a professor of geophysics, to head a government and abolished the 2014 constitution. Saïed said he would hold a referendum in July this year on a new constitution to be drafted by a panel of experts—after a

public online consultation process—that is widely expected to strengthen the powers of the presidency. The referendum, set for July 25, would be followed by parliamentary elections on December 17.

In the event, less than 10 percent of voters took part in the consultation, indicating the widespread hostility to the president and his policies. The two largest parties, Ennahda and the Free Constitutional Party, both also deeply unpopular, have rejected Saïed's plans for a July referendum and called for elections to be held within the legally mandated 90 day period after the dissolution of parliament.

Following the ouster in 2011 of long-time autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled to Riyadh, Saïed, a former law professor and establishment figure with conservative views, entered politics, becoming president in 2019.

Saïed's long-planned actions were the prelude to setting up a presidential dictatorship, aimed at maintaining the venal Tunisian elite's grip on economic and political power in the face of mounting unrest among workers and young people. The major imperialist powers issued pro forma statements urging him to respect the constitution. The Tunisian General Labour Movement (UGTT), the largest union, called on him to “guarantee the constitutional legitimacy of all actions taken in these difficult times.”

In the eight months following his coup, the economic situation has worsened. The OECD's report, *Tunisia 2022*, published on Monday, stated, “Tunisians are facing the worst crisis in a generation, as COVID-19 hit an economy that was already slowing down.” The pandemic had led to a severe economic contraction, particularly in the tourism and service sectors. Unemployment has risen from already high levels—particularly among Tunisia's young population

of whom more than one third are aged 15-29. Poverty is on the increase. Shortages of sugar and rice are widespread.

Public finances have collapsed, with some public sector wages paid late in recent months. This prompted the government to turn to the International Monetary Fund for a loan that would require privatising its state-run companies, slashing its public sector wage bill, imposing new taxes and increasing existing ones and taking the axe to bread subsidies under conditions of widespread food shortages. But any such loan, which would need the buy-in of the main political parties and the UGTT, is unlikely to be agreed before the summer, which may well be too late to prevent a collapse of the currency, late or non-payment of state salaries and the country's ability to import basic state-subsidised foodstuffs.

The loan is further imperilled by Tunisia's response to the US/NATO provoked war in Ukraine, as Saïed tries to maintain relations with Russia which Tunisia relies on for tourism and trade, without antagonising the United States and Europe, whose financial and diplomatic support are crucial to keep the economy afloat. While Tunisia voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution denouncing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has refrained from publicly denouncing Russia. In welcoming the new Russian ambassador to Tunisia a few days later, Foreign Minister Othman Jerandi stressed a desire to strengthen the relationship between the two countries.

This year has seen numerous demonstrations protesting social and economic conditions, with the total number of demonstrations in the eight months since Saïed's July coup topping those that preceded it.

Last month, 13 Tunisian and international rights groups reported on a leaked draft law that would give government authorities huge powers and discretion to interfere with the formation, funding, operation and freedom of expression of NGOs and civil society organisations, reinstating many of the restrictive regulations of the repressive Ben Ali regime. Human rights groups have warned of growing repression of journalists and activists by a president who promised to uphold rights and freedoms won in the 2011 uprising.

Turning reality on its heels, Saïed has accused the legislators of "an attempted coup" by holding an "illegal" meeting and defended his decision to dissolve

parliament as a defence of the state. The justice minister has reportedly ordered an investigation of those who took part in the online session "for conspiring against state security." Rached Ghannouchi, the parliamentary speaker of the assembly and head of the Ennahda Party, the largest with one quarter of its 217 seats, said that the Terror Crimes Investigation Unit had summoned him and at least 20 legislators from Ennahda and other parties for questioning.

Saïed could again bank on the UGTT's support. Secretary-General Nouredine Taboubi has long called for the politicians to set aside their differences and hold a "national dialogue" before the elections, saying, "We have to get over the difference of considering what happened last 25 July as a coup or not."

He had called for Saïed to dissolve parliament and applauded him when he did so, stating that it was a response to an effort aiming to "destabilise the country and lead it to a wave of legitimacy conflicts." On April 1, he held talks with Saïed and agreed on the need for a "partnership" to overcome the economic crisis.

The major powers have largely remained silent, with the European Union (EU) keeping the financial taps flowing to prevent the country's collapse. On the same day Saïed dissolved parliament, the European Commission announced it would lend Tunisia €450 million in budget support this year, following a meeting between Saïed and EU enlargement commissioner Olivér Várhelyi in Tunis.

The events of the last 11 years since the protests that toppled the Ben Ali regime have demonstrated that without the working class intervening independently of all the political parties and trade unions the ruling elite will, under the cover of a "technocrat" as in Tunisia, Lebanon and Iraq, or a military figure as in Egypt, resort to increasingly repressive means to maintain the rule of the kleptocracy.



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