

Tunisia's President Saied announces bogus election as judiciary disqualifies and imprisons opposition leaders

Jean Shaoul
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Tunisia's authoritarian President Kais Saied, who has ruled by decree since suspending parliament in July 2021, has announced he will stand in the elections for another five-year term. He was answering the "country's sacred call" that left him no choice but to run for a second term.

The elections, set for October 6, are a fraud. Saied is setting himself up to be the only candidate as his tamed judiciary eliminates many of his potential opponents, disqualifying, imprisoning or holding them in pre-trial detention on an array of charges, including some under Tunisia's counter-terrorism law carrying heavy sentences.

His aim is to consolidate his one-man dictatorship and impose the full burden of Tunisia's deep-rooted economic problems on the working class on behalf of the country's corrupt financial elite.

Among those sentenced to imprisonment are:

* Lotfi Mraïhi, head of the Republican People's Union and one of Saied's foremost critics. Having announced his intention to stand for the presidency, he was arrested in July on suspicion of corruption and money laundering and sentenced to eight months in prison and a lifetime ban on standing for office.

* Abir Moussi, secretary general of the Free Destourian Party that reveres the autocracies of Habib Bourguiba and his successor Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who was toppled in the popular uprising of 2011. She was sentenced to two years in prison on a charge of insulting the election commission, having been held in detention since October 2013.

* Issam Chebbi, general secretary of the Republican (Jomhuri) Party. Arrested in February 2023 and detained for "plotting against the state," he has been forced to withdraw his candidacy after the electoral commission tightened its rules on sponsorship. More than 20 other opposition figures have faced similar accusations. In February, Chebbi and five other political prisoners went on hunger strike to protest a year of "unjust detention and

injustice."

* Abdellatif Mekki, a former health minister and leader of the Islamist Ennahda Party who now heads the Amal w Injaz party. He faces charges of fraud and money laundering and has now withdrawn his candidacy. Mekki, along with activist Nizar Chaari, Judge Mourad Massoudi and Adel Dou, was sentenced to eight months in prison and banned from running for office on a charge of vote buying.

Several other candidates are facing charges such as fraud and money laundering, while Mondher Znaïdi, another prominent potential candidate living in France, is facing corruption charges.

According to Amnesty International, most of the opposition parties' senior members are being held in pre-trial detention on charges of corruption, including Ghazi Chaouachi, former secretary general of the Attayar party, Jaouher Ben Mbarek, one of the leaders of the Salvation Front, and many high-level Ennahdha leaders, including Rached Ghannouchi, Nouredine Bhiri and Sahbi Atig.

These prosecutions and arrests are part of a broader crackdown on freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly that demonstrate Saied's refusal to countenance dissent or challenge to his rule.

In September 2022, Saied issued a presidential decree imposing prison sentences of up to 10 years for the vague charge of spreading "rumours and fake news."

Since then, the authorities have carried out a series of arrests. They have subjected more than 70 people, including political opponents, lawyers, journalists, activists and human rights defenders, to arbitrary prosecutions and/or arbitrary detention. As of last May, at least 40 people remained arbitrarily detained for exercising internationally protected rights such as freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

The media has been all but silenced. According to a report by several journalists' organisations, at least nine journalists faced harassment and assaults by protesters or security forces during demonstrations in the days after Saied's power

grab in July 2021 began.

Security forces, reportedly under orders from the Tunisian interior ministry, attacked newsrooms. They raided *Al Jazeera's* offices in July 2021 and stormed the broadcasting rooms of Tunisian public television in January 2023. Later, police raided the home of Noureddine Boutar, head of Mosaique FM, one of Tunisia's largest independent radio stations. He now faces charges of money laundering and "illicit enrichment." The head of Tunisia's Journalists Syndicate (SNJT), Mohamed Mehdi Jelassi, said he was facing a criminal investigation over his coverage of a July 2022 protest against Tunisia's constitutional referendum.

Having signed a deal with the European Union in July 2023 worth €900 million in financial aid in return for preventing refugees from crossing to Europe, Saied has received €105 million to upgrade his border police and deport refugees. He launched a clampdown on migrants, refugees, and human rights defenders working to protect their rights, as well as journalists. It followed a meeting in April with the Italian Ministry of Interior about "migration management."

This crackdown has included arresting, summoning and investigating the heads, former staff or members of at least 12 organizations over vague allegations, such as "financial crimes," for providing aid to migrants. The authorities have arrested at least two journalists and referred them to trial because of their comments in the media. Tunisia's security forces have escalated their deportations of refugees and migrants, as well as multiple forced evictions, and have arrested and convicted landlords for renting apartments to migrants without permits.

The European Union shamelessly exploited Tunisia facing economic meltdown and urgent need for financial aid. Economic growth has fallen from 3.5 percent between 2000 to 2010 to 1.7 percent between 2011 and 2019, while the COVID 19 pandemic decimated the economy which relies heavily on tourism. Around 20 percent of the workforce—and 37 percent of young workers—are officially unemployed, but the number of people hanging out in the streets of the towns and cities outside the capital Tunis suggest the reality is far worse. Over the past year, inflation rose to around 9 to 10 percent, driven by the rise in food prices by 15.3 percent in the first half of the year. Wages have remained stagnant, leading to a precipitous decline in living standards.

Hunger has increased dramatically, with two thirds of Tunisians saying they have gone without food at least once in the previous month. Nearly half, particularly the young and better educated, say they have considered emigrating. The war in Gaza has deeply affected Tunisians' view of the US and its allies, which have backed Israel to the hilt, with favourable views of the US declining from 40 percent before

the war to just 10 percent afterwards.

Western governments and think tanks had hailed Tunisia as the "success story" of the Arab Spring on the grounds that it has not been subjected to the kind of sociocide meted out to Iraq, Libya and Syria in Washington's wars for regime change or seen the kind of mass arrests and killings that have taken place under the US-backed dictatorship of former army commander Abdel-Fatah El Sisi in Egypt.

But more than 13 years after the mass revolutionary upheavals that toppled the Western-backed dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben-Ali, none of the aspirations for jobs, democratic rights and social equality that brought the Tunisian working class into struggle have been realized.

The failure of the 2011 uprising was due to its lack of a revolutionary internationalist perspective and leadership that would allow the working class to take power into its own hands after toppling Ben Ali.

As the Tunisian Revolution broke out in 2011, the International Committee of the Fourth International explained that the decisive question was to widen the revolutionary struggle in Tunisia into a broader international struggle of the working class for socialism and to bring down the capitalist system. This required the building of a Trotskyist revolutionary leadership in the working class:

"Weak and dependent, tied by innumerable threads to foreign imperialism and native feudal forces, the bourgeoisie of countries such as Tunisia is a thousand times more fearful of and hostile to the revolutionary force of the working class than it is to imperialism. ... Without the development of a revolutionary leadership, another authoritarian regime will inevitably be installed to replace that of Ben Ali."



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