

The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

Massive Pro-Democracy Demonstrations Take Place in Tunisia as Thousands of Citizens Continue to Oppose the Actions of President Kais Saied

This past weekend, large-scale demonstrations took place in Tunisia, as thousands of citizens continue to protest against the actions of President Kais Saied. The Tunisian president's power grab last July was met with immediate criticism and concern from pro-democratic voices, and opposition has only grown further in recent months. Saied indefinitely suspended parliament and sacked the country's prime minister, and has enacted additional authoritarian-like measures to try and expand his powers. As a result, demands have been raised for the president to resign and for the government to immediately hold new elections. Moreover, only a miniscule segment of eligible voters in Tunisia have taken part in Saied's online consultations poll due to the increased opposition against his anti-democratic behavior. Ultimately, the president's political maneuvers have been denounced by civil society organizations and human rights groups who have expressed worry regarding the risk of Tunisia suffering an authoritarian backslide.

Many of the demonstrators from this most recent wave of protests spoke about how they voted for Saied in the past, but had since become opposed to his behavior. For example, Mounira Bouazizi, a rights activist, expressed that "I thought he believed in democracy and the gains of the revolution, but he did the complete opposite." Others also voiced their disdain for Saied's anti-democratic practices and the preposterous nature of the president claiming that all of his actions are within the rules of the constitution and that he will protect freedoms and liberties. Saied has offered to hold a national dialogue about the country's political system, but has given no detail about when and where it will take place. This comes as he continues his attempts to rewrite the constitution to further consolidate his power. His previously aforementioned attempt to "consult" the people in the form of an online poll has failed. Only about 7% of Tunisia's eligible voters took part according to official statistics. Pro-democracy demonstrators have also been calling for the release of the former head of the bar association, Abderrazek Kilani, who has been an avid opponent to Saied's authoritarian power grab.

This increasing turmoil comes as Tunisia is in negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The country's economy has been in free fall with rapidly increasing prices and high unemployment rates. The deal that has been proposed so far has met with stiff pushback from the UGTT, one of Tunisia's most powerful labor unions. They have voiced increasing concern that they will not be included in talks to reform the economy to meet the IMF standards. A combination of pressure from labor unions and people angered by the backsliding towards authoritarian rule could prove disastrous for Saied.

Tunisia has often been seen as the one country to emerge from the Arab Spring of 2011 with significant democratic gains. In transition since then, Saied was elected but has failed to uphold his promises of protecting democracy and freedoms in light of his actions over the past eight months. Many rights organizations are also voicing their concerns about Saied's blatant consolidation of power. The large-scale demonstrations this past weekend symbolically took place on the 66th anniversary of Tunisia's Independence Day. Protesters have demanded that the embattled president step down and that early elections be held for a new legislature and president.