



Tunisian President Kais Saied Engages in Further Anti-Democratic Actions by Seizing Control of the Country's Electoral Commission

Tunisia's democratic backslide continues as President Kais Saied issued a recent decree to restructure the country's Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) – a council of independent officials tasked with overseeing elections to assure their integrity. Saied announced that he will amend the current nine-member council into a seven-member panel. The reworking would allow for three judges to be appointed by the Supreme Judicial Council, a body that he also previously unilaterally replaced, which undermined the independence of the judiciary as well. Additionally, Saied will have the power to choose the head of the new commission, with pro-democracy advocates highlighting how such measures would result in the ISIE losing its independence and credibility. Former Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki expressed that “there is no goal behind Saied's decree other than controlling any electoral process to reproduce dictatorship and autocracy, and falsifying the popular will.” Saied's move is part of an ever-growing and worrying authoritarian trend in Tunisia, a country previously lauded as the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring. In light of Saied's latest action, lawmakers and rights groups in the United States sent a letter this week urging the Biden administration to condition parts of the U.S.'s security assistance package to Tunisia in an attempt to deter his anti-democratic behavior.

The consistent political course taking place in Tunisia has alarmed both internal and external observers, including the U.S. State Department, which has repeatedly called for a return to the democratic path. Saied has tried to claim that his actions are legal and necessary for the betterment of Tunisia, however each passing action further crystalizes his desire to cement power. As such, the overwhelming majority of entities in Tunisia have labeled Saied's moves a coup against the democratic constitution. There are also growing concerns among civil society organizations in Tunisia after a draft of the proposed law was leaked that would make it near impossible for them to operate within the country. This law, if enacted, would require their activities to align with “legal and scientific regulations,” a broad definition that would open the door for the government to easily abuse its enforcement. Also problematic is the fact that organizations would be required to obtain government authorization before they can secure legal status.

Saied has been gradually losing the initial embrace he once had. At first, he received some level of support because he was seen as attempting to combat government stagnation and corruption. The economic crisis that is looming over Tunisia is one of the major factors that is fueling opposition to his actions. The Tunisian economy is currently struggling with skyrocketing inflation and an unemployment rate of 18%, and the country's national debt has reached 100% of its gross domestic product. Though currently in negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, the rescue package will likely lead to crippling cuts in public spending. This would jeopardize the jobs of 650,000 people that currently work for the government. Cherif El Kadhi, a policy analyst in Tunis, believes that this economic downturn will have a significant impact on Saied's popularity: “The main concern of the people is the economy. People want to keep their jobs; they want to make sure they have food on their tables.”

Democratic backsliding in Tunisia under Saied may continue, but what is also evident is that the will of the country's citizens to preserve democratic gains is also strong. Sizable pro-democracy protests are ongoing and likely to grow as outrage persists. Democracies around the world have been called on to offer more support to ensure that the past decade's achievements are not lost.