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# Investigating international factors aiding an authoritarian turn: The case of Tunisia

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## 1. Introduction

The status of democracies around the world has arguably taken a turn for the worse as the second decade of this century has seen more and more states reverting to less democratic features. A range of democracy indices have in recent years cautioned against democratic backsliding (Boix, Miller, & Rosato, 2018; Freedom House, 2022; EIU, 2021). The databases unanimously show that the number of functioning democracies has decreased in the past decade with some long-standing bastions of democracy falling behind on democratic indices. Reports show that the number of autocratic or ‘not free’ regimes has not really increased, however, many sovereign states are struggling to maintain the ideals of democracy (Freedom House, 2022). A large part of the world currently resides in state structures which are neither wholly democratic or wholly autocratic, and thus, resembling some sort of hybrid regimes. Moreover, the notion of democracies being economically buoyant has been challenged by the pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine and most prominently with the economic and normative growth of autocratic regimes like China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar etc.

The definition of democracy and its perception amongst its populace plays a role in determining the political character of a country. Although so do the ambitions of the political elite and the socio-economic conditions. To the least democracy is, a governing system based on the will and consent of its people, institutions that are accountable to all citizens, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights (Freedom House, 2022). All these factors overlap with each other, and all the pillars need to be strong as weakening in one, leads to the weakening of other pillars as well. The narrative in the twentieth century western discourse propagated the idea of ‘spreading’ democracy, however, now the narrative seems to have shifted to the idea of ‘defending’ democracy. Academia has witnessed a similar turn in etymology as the concept which gained traction

as democratic reversal has shifted more and more towards authoritarian diffusion or authoritarian resilience (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2017).

Understandably, reasons for authoritarian resilience vary from regions, to states and to locales. The pandemic, economic recession, youth unemployment, rise of non-state actors are some of the few universal factors which could be attributed to authoritarian turns. Broadly, a state's nature can be influenced through two broad means, domestic and international factors, both of which influence each other (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010). For instance, during the Arab Spring, poor economic performance of a country could be, among other factors be attributed to a global recession and corruption combined with ensuing inequitable growth which in led to increase in grievances. Similarly, local protests in Tunisia became a catalyst for demonstrations and protests all over the region and the fall of long-standing regimes sent messages to distant authoritarian regimes such as China (Jacobs and Ansfield, 2011; He, 2011). Therefore, it makes sense to entertain explanations to explore influences of transitory phenomena on a case-by-case basis.

The region of Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the regional belt which had been catapulted into regime change through wars and revolutions in the past decade flustered down to new dictatorships (Egypt) or unstable governance structures (Syria, Algeria) (Robbins, 2022). As a matter of fact, the region has the least number of democratic countries in the world (Freedom House, 2022). In the early years of Arab Spring, people of the Arab World expressed favourability towards democratic change as a solution for economic growth, security and stability, although this opinion has taken a sharp decline in the decade ever since (Robbins, 2022). The sharpest decline in favourability has been observed in states which had made the most democratic progress since the Arab Spring and have since experienced democratic reversal, Tunisia, Iraq and Lebanon (Robbins, 2022). However, it is important to note that the people of

the MENA still believe that democracy is the most appropriate governance system despite the performance of democratic systems declining.

In this time, Tunisia had been the lone example of a state that had peacefully transitioned from an autocratic regime to a parliamentary democracy in the MENA region. Tunisia was the only state in the region (apart from Israel) which held the “Free” status on the Freedom House democracy index in the period from 2015 until 2021 (Freedom House, 2022). While ranking considerably well in the indices of democracy, the democratic regime was not able to sustain democratic institutions, leading to a decade of protests and eventually Kais Saied suspending the parliament, establishing a rule by decree and in the next year holding a controversial referendum to limit the powers of the judiciary and the parliament, giving himself additional executive powers in the course (Reuters, 2022; Boussen & Lakhel, 2022). Saied currently holds executive powers over the judiciary, legislative and all other state institutions. Ever since 2021, Tunisia has slid back into Ben Ali era political elite governance structures. The elections after the constitutional changes experienced 8.8% voter turnout, were boycotted by most opposition parties and hence, resulting in outright wins for pro-Saied July 25<sup>th</sup> movement (Cordall 2022).

Upon his election and until the dismissal of the parliament Kais Saied enjoyed sufficient support from his western partners. Tunisia had been increasing its cooperation and relations with EU, US, China, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar despite being in a political economic crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, President Saied’s justification of these magnanimous changes to Tunisian governance has split the Tunisian population, civil society and the international society the same throwing its western partners in a state of confusion. The president cites the corrupt nature of political parties, their lack of competencies, crony capitalism and the 2014 constitution as causes for this change. The international society has had oscillating views on the events in

Tunisia and of the President, while EU has been the most critical thus far of Kais Saied when compared to his predecessors, EU has also increased its partnerships and aid to Tunisia in this brief period.

As for the domestic view of Tunisia, all sections of the Tunisian elite have generally had a favourable view towards Europe in some of the norms that EU promoted during the strong relations former autocrat Zinedine Ben Ali (Weilandt, 2022). European Union in its official mandate has vied to have deeper relations with North Africa through Barcelona Process and the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) but confines itself in normative and economic influence in the region. The impact of the EU policies has drawn debate in terms of its actual impact in democratisation and ‘will’ of the EU for the reforms to happen (Bicchi, 2013; Pace, 2009; Tocci & Cassarino, 2011). This would be elaborated in the literature review and through the thesis. Furthermore, Tunisia has had strong historical relations with France, Italy and other European states because of its geography, colonial history and more importantly trade and migration (Bichhi, 2013). As a matter of fact, more than half of total trade of Tunisia depends on the European Union. Thus, EU and especially, France and Italy have strong economic and diplomatic influence in Tunisia. Furthermore, the discourse in Tunisia is not isolated on the world stage as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have had constitutional referendums of a similar nature, on the promises of transforming the respective states into evolved democracies, but eventually, the autocrats have consolidated their rule (Alzhanov, 2022; Andrusz, 2023). Therefore, Tunisia is not an isolated case and is a first example in a seemingly emerging trend, therefore needs to be addressed within democratisation academia.

This thesis, therefore, wishes to outline the influence of the European Union, Tunisia’s most important partner influencing the authoritarian turn experienced



in Tunisia with the dismissal of the parliament and the constitutional referendum in 2022. This thesis would attempt to answer the main question:

**How does the discourse created by the EU towards Tunisia since the Arab Spring played a role in Kais Saied consolidating executive power over the Tunisia's institutions?**

To answer this question this thesis will use the literature to establish discourses of influence of the European Union, to assess the role of the European partners in Tunisia's domestic policies. The main hypothesis needed to be explored is the influence of the international discourse providing legitimacy to the actions of Kais Saied through low accountability. The next section reviews the existing literature and outlines the gaps in the broader literature which this thesis aims to contribute towards followed by a brief part highlighting the research design of the thesis.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review conceptualises the key elements under consideration for this research to answer the primary question, how did EU discourse contribute to the authoritarian turn in Tunisia following the constitutional referendum in 2022. To answer the main question likely explanations of the phenomenon that would be discussed is as follows - EU partners provided legitimisation to Kais Saied's actions by creating a positive international discourse. Therefore, this thesis argues that western policy towards Tunisia is the continuation of its policy towards Tunisia and towards the region for a long time.

This literature review looks at the democratisation literature and the factors that have been identified to influence it. To begin with, it is important to outline that democratisation is a layered and interactive phenomenon which is constructed by interactions of actors in different levels of power (Hadenius & Teorell, 2007) and the structure of the institutions in which this power is exercised (Bellin, 2012). At the outset it is important to define terminologies, this literature review puts the processes of democratisation and its opposite anti-thesis on a spectrum, hence, implying that they have a countervailing pull over each other and the theoretical approach to one can also define another (Ambrosio, 2007). As democratisation literature developed, it had been confined to democratic diffusion, a bias that was challenged (Ambrosio, 2007). However, Tunisia's case presents an opportunity to study a process to study the process of democratisation over decade and a reversal of those gains over a period of two years. The strength of these actors to resist pressures of change, from within (Bellin, 2012) and from the international discourse (Heydemann, 2007) would be their relative authoritarian resilience. Prior to the Arab Spring, Heydemann (2007) argued that in the twenty-first of this century, authoritarian regimes had strengthened in the Arab world despite, social movements and pro-democratic protests had started to gain popularity. He calls the Arab autocracies a unique

region, where democratic values had not diffused despite numerous efforts by international and local actors. He argued that democracy promotion initiatives by the west, were used by the Arab autocrats along with mirages of political reform, without ever having an intention to democratise (Durac & Cavatorta, 2015; 2009). The ‘upgraded authoritarianism’ conceptualised by Heydemann (2007), was directed towards pretending to liberalise the economies and the societies, create biased democratic institutions and managing political contestation. Essentially, he argued that the autocrats had managed to take advantage of the international environment to avoid genuine change. The Arab spring proved to be pivotal moment to test and shift narratives in research towards the MENA region. The mass revolutions which resulted in the end of four dictatorships (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen) and mass protests throughout the region, prompted reassessment into transitionary studies and in the Arab world. This thesis presents some answers and development of Heydeman’s ideas into the period after Arab Spring in Tunisia and the resilience of autocratic ideas that have re-emerged in a new actor.

Scholarship has attributed different factors that contribute to the resilience of authoritarian regimes in the Arab World including but not limited to the weakness of civil society (Wiktorowicz, 2000); the deliberate manipulation and division of opposition forces (Heydeman, 2007b); the co-optation of social forces through the distribution of rent, cronyism, and stunted economic liberalization (Moore, 2004); the region’s cultural endowment (Kramer, 1993; Cavatorta, 2018; Kraetzschmar & Rivetti, 2018); the prevalence and peculiar logic of monarchy (Anderson, 1991; Lucas, 2004); the embrace of liberalized autocracy (Brumberg, 2002); and the effective manipulation of political institutions such as parties and electoral laws (Brownlee, 2007); and presence of regional coercive apparatus (Bellin, 2012). However, in different approaches, one thing is evident, these different actors are influenced by the structure of institutions, civil society actors, ruling elite and international actors. Therefore,

four dimensions of a state's regime structure – structure of the institutions, elites, non-elites (civil society) and international actors (Battaloglu & Farasin, 2017). This literature review posits that it is the interactions of these actors constructs governance structures of a state. Therefore, it is important to conceptualise these interactions within a given context. These interactions are unique in different polities (locales, intra-state, regionally and internationally) and several different conceptualisations could be used to explain different phenomena. Having acknowledged the fact, this thesis confines itself in variables of its interest while acknowledging the different perspectives wherever necessary. The following sections would identify the actors who influence democratic transitions or authoritarian resilience and how do these actors interact with each other in different strata of this continuum.

## 2.1 Institutions, Civil Society and the Elites

### 2.1.1 Institutionalisation of values

Battaloglu and Farasin (2017) note that international actors can play a role in transferring democratic values through the institutions, elite relations and through the civil society. Previous empirical research on EU democracy promotion programmes in the post-Soviet space, it has been argued that the normative transfer of democratic values can only be limited to general democratic values but critical values like political tolerance can only be conceived through an institutionalised experience of living in a democratic society (Rohrschneider, 1996; Rohrschneider & Peffley, 2003). Moreover, Brownlee (2007) argues that institutionalisation of authoritarian values in the public sphere provides strength and stability to authoritarian regimes. Therefore, in a state where authoritarianism has been institutionalised over a long period of time and the elites, the civil society and the populace does not have

democratic experience, values like political tolerance can be difficult to transfer in such a case.

Institutionalisation of authoritarianism is constructed by structuring elite relations and consolidating elite and traditional civil society support, without leaving any space for opposition and the institutionalisation of elite into positions of power providing collective benefits to each other (Brownlee, 2007). Brownlee further elaborates that for an authoritarian, restructuring of elite relations should be in favour of the authoritarian forces in such a way that opposition is persecuted and kept outside the institutional structures. The post-Cold-war transitions in the eastern bloc provide further empirical examples proving that while popular movements were able to catalyze far reaching implications and transforming state institutions, the political and non-political elites clawed their way back into power (Kennedy, 2014). These relationships are characterised by crony capitalism and patron clientelism which encourages more power consolidation (Moore, 2004). Thus, it can be inferred that while the civil society has an essential role in catalysing regime change- the levels of support from the ruling elite, space for opposition and hierarchies of civil society tend to influence the democratic nature of the resulting regime.

### 2.1.2 The role of the Elite

The elite-centred approach developed in the early 70s and has evolved since (Rustow, 1970), attracting interest from scholars from post-Soviet studies in the 90s, through the persistence of political elite in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. This approach believes that the elites are one of the main drivers of transitions, democratic or authoritarian. While ruling elite in political sphere are the ones to consolidate power, however people in positions of authority, powerful public and private organisations as well as leaders of influential movements would also be considered into the elites of the society (Higley and Moore, 1991:36). In

Arab societies, the leaders of the civil society have strong links with the state institutions but power is polarised towards the state through coercive apparatuses and endowed with both the “capacity” and “will” to repress democratic initiatives originating from society (Bellin, 2012). This approach argues that in an autocratic society, the civil society can be an extension of the state or ‘regime tool’ (Wiktorowicz, 2000), as without state approval it is difficult for civil society organisations to sustain. The civil society that exists, is in the purview of the state and some pro-regime actors of the civil society are parts of the regime by extension. The theory of civil society as regime tool is elaborated further in the next paragraphs.

Bellin’s approach outlines levels of confluence which influence the ‘will’ and ‘capacity’ of the coercive apparatuses of the MENA regimes. Firstly, the fiscal health of the regimes if they have resource wealth and secondly, the international support networks which provide legitimacy in partnerships. These two factors are intrinsic to the region however not all states in the region have resource abundant territories which might tend to weaken the coercive apparatus. Therefore, the legitimacy provided by the international support networks has more importance in determining the capacity and will of the coercive apparatus of the state (Bellin, 2012). As an example, resource abundant Gulf monarchies had strong coercive apparatuses to resist protests within their countries during the Arab Spring, whereas resource poor countries like Egypt and Tunisia were not. The dictators in Egypt and Tunisia relied on aid from their western partners and had to maintain strong economic and diplomatic relations with their donor states to maintain their coercive apparatuses as they would not receive international criticisms. For instance, neoliberal economic reforms promoted by the west in 90s with promises of financial aid and their adoption by Ben Ali’s regime, added to the ‘capacity’ of the coercive nature of the regime, as repression of the civil society and social movements increased but it went unnoticed by the western partners (Durac & Cavatorta, 2015). Moreover, the

benefits of the reforms were used to consolidate power by the elite of the regime due to inequitable distribution caused by patron-clientelism and crony capitalism.

### 2.1.3 Different conceptions of the Civil Society

Moreover, the conception of civil society by Bellin seems incomplete and hence needs to be explored further. Linz and Stepan (1996) and Bernhard (1993) argue for civil societies' role that democratization has only existed in conjunction with a civil society which constitutes of a sphere of autonomy from which political forces representing constellations of interests in society interact with state power. However, it is the opposite in authoritarian regimes (Brownlee, 2007). This sphere of autonomy can be exercised by social groups, political parties, social movements and different forms of media. Presence of a vibrant civil society is a necessary condition for the existence of representative forms of government (Bernhard, 1993). It is imperative to understand the case specific composition of civil society actors in the region of interest in this case, the MENA region and in what circumstances has the civil society been able to act as this catalyst of change. The role of civil society in MENA has been an area of debate for a long time. Firstly, the most simplistic definition of civil society in MENA can be seen from the liberal perspective that civil society organisation would only include western normative roles of civil society as organisations which are exclusively promoting democratic reform and are secular and liberal in the most European sense of the terms (Yom, 2005). This approach does not include the important actors prevalent in the Arab civil society like, Islamists and other religious groups without taking into consideration what these groups do or demand in practice. The constrains of the need to confine civil society to liberal democratic groups creates a much weaker space in MENA to apply pressure on the authoritarian regimes and actors who are dominant in the public sphere are excluded (Durac and Cavatorta, 2015b: 166). Secondly, an evolved

version of this liberal democratic approach would be to see civil society as neutral, non-normative and truly just as a space between the individual and the state (Encarnacion, 2006; Berman, 2003). This approach departs from Eurocentrism and presents a strong and relatively independent civil society that is dominated by Islamist actors in the MENA, who as part of the civil society are nevertheless considered illiberal and non-drivers of change (Wiktorowicz, 2004; Singerman, 2004). In some perspectives, Islamisation of the society not been considered as a threat to the ruling elites if it remained outside the political sphere (through coercion or adaptation) much like ‘apolitical’ versions of Salafism, prospered in pre-revolution Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco compared to political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Anani and Malik, 2013). This approach looks at civil society as an amalgamation of different actors who are driven by goals and seek change in some manner or the other. This approach proposes divides in the civil society are not appropriate drivers of change and argues that these divides hinder consensus building in post-authoritarian states which hinders state building processes. Regardless, the assumption of civil society’s primary need to drive political change is flawed, empirically, both liberal democratic groups and Islamists have mixed records in defending individual rights and liberal ideas and the assumptions can be refuted in the number of cases (Cavatorta, 2006; Cook, 2005; Cavatorta and Durac, 2010: 69–70).<sup>1</sup>

Conceding the limitations of the earlier approaches, a third approach visualises the civil society as a ‘regime tool’, artificially created by the incumbents to soften the authoritarian image in the international society (Wiktorowicz, 2000). The relative increase in ‘autonomy’ is supported by Heydeman’s (2007)

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<sup>1</sup> Cavatorta presents the example of Moroccan Islamist Justice’s struggle against the use of state. Cook (2005) gives examples of how liberal groups have defended illiberal positions to gain benefits from incumbent autocrats. Cavatorta and Durac give the example of Human Rights organisation supporting or ignoring the persecution of Salafists by the state security forces of Morocco throughout the 200s.



argument of MENA autocracies ‘upgrading’ their authoritarianism by observing experiences in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Liberal legislations enabled more civil society organisations, who are monitored more closely by the state apparatuses and gives opportunity for the ruling elite to pre-empt opposition (Durac & Cavatorta, 2015; Liverani, 2008), exercising control in the civil society through organisations indistinguishable from the state. The next layer provides nuance to the regime tool’ approach by arguing that the civil society, to function effectively, needs to abide by the rules of the authoritarian regimes and the assumed role of the civil society, which by a Eurocentric perspective should be democratisation, is not the priority anymore, but effectiveness and impact is (Jamal, 2007). Civil society relies on state support, and to exist in authoritarian settings it is often necessary. However, this leads to the civil society functioning effectively within the authoritarian constraints which paradoxically strengthens the goodwill of the regime.

Lastly, the concept of ‘activated citizenship’ which expands the domain of the actors in the civil society past hierarchies and usual actors, and posits that isolated actors are better equipped to circumnavigate repressive state systems (Cavatorta and Durac, 2015). These may include individual writings of lone dissenters, social media posts and individual information sharing that attracts mass attention. Sources of media exchange (digital and social media) play a role in this form of civil society (Hoffman, 2012). Incidents of activated citizenship then in turn challenge the existing hierarchies and perceptions of existing civil society actors much like was observed during the Arab Spring. As a matter of fact, during the early demonstrations in the Arab Spring, traditional secular or Islamist groups practiced restraint in participation at the protests. The protests which were spurred by moments of individual activated citizenship however, traditional actors were quick to consolidate power after the autocratic regimes fell.

The last two approaches argue that the traditional actors of civil society tend to get rigid and confine themselves to the limited autonomy provided to them by the states, sometimes resulting in privileged positions acting as extensions of the ruling elite or in other cases, maximising their impact within the status quo. However, 'moments of activated citizenship' has been weak in terms of sustaining the pressure of change on the state institutions as experienced in most of the MENA region after the Arab Spring and in Tunisia ever since. Nevertheless, the role of civil society is heightened in times of transition, it can transform the traditional marginalised actors as the new elite (Kotzé & Du Toit, 1995; Bernhard, 1996). Thus, in a sense, elitist aspirations of the civil society actors do become essential factors influencing the transitions of the forms of governance. Even though, for democratic transitions in particular, active participation in civil society is important to catalyse regime reshuffle in the first place. It is then, in the power vacuum that the elites reorganise and opportunities for the new post-revolutionary powers to influence the transitions.

## 2.2 International factors

The variables looked at so far, are confined to the territoriality of the state, however, states are themselves a part of the international society and interactions with actors outside the borders do play a role in domestic structures of a state (Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006).

### 2.2.1 How do norms and values transfer transnationally -

Different processes have been identified in theory to explain democratic transitions. Whitehead (2001) uses the geographical proximity to certain regime types as a 'contagion' effect, 'control' which is exercised by third party policy influence and the third, 'consent' which implies recognizes that democratization within a country cannot convincingly be wholly ascribed to external agency and

the receptivity of domestic factors is needed in terms of consent. 'Linkage' and 'leverage' approach argues that a states 'linkages' to the power centres who promote certain values along with the government's vulnerability to external pressure combine to influence transitional processes in a country (Levitsky & Way, 2005). An abundant line of literature focuses on democratic diffusion from western European into post-soviet spaces after the dissolution of Soviet Union (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Kopstein & Reilly, 2000; Lankina & Getachew, 2006; O'Loughlin et al., 1998). The goal of these studies has been to explain the variables of influence which imoacted democratic transitions in Eurasia which are detached from geo-spatial contexts where the countries are situated (Lankina et al., 2016). However, overwhelming amount of literature grounds confines itself in the democratic diffusion through the west, arguing that the west is a successful promoter of democracy in its neighbourhood. With the promise of memberships in EU, albeit these memberships not promised forthcoming anytime soon, the incentives provided by the EU in the first European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003, assistance in loans through IMF and World Bank, multiple strategic partnerships on conditionality are forms of 'targeted', deliberate and planned norm diffusion processes have been conceptualised as 'leverage', 'conditionality' or 'targeted democracy promotion' (Kelley, 2006). These processes are directed towards the 'elite' of the recipient state, to comply with the norms of democracy and peace supported by the EU. On the other hand, more spontaneous forms of democratic diffusion, which happen through citizen-to-citizen interactions, business interactions and cultural ties have been conceptualised into terms like 'linkages' (Levitsky & Way, 2006, 2010), 'flows' (Kopstein & Reilly, 2000) and 'socialisation' (Kelley, 2006). Therefore, the linkages often transfer through civil society and people interactions. While these outlined studies focus on transitions towards the democratic side, more recently literature has emerged which investigates 'targeted' authoritarian diffusion (Koesel & Bunce, 2013) and 'spontaneous' authoritarian diffusion through trade (Libman & Obydenkova, 2014; 2012). Hence, confirming the influence of the

spontaneous forms of diffusion processes occur through civil society interactions. Koesel and Bunce (2013) investigate how Russia and China, two authoritarian states pre-empted the effects of the colour revolutions and the Arab spring to diffusion-proof their rule. This work is a representation of the theme that the authoritarian research follows, the spread of authoritarianism through the hegemonic powers Russia and China. The role of smaller authoritarian states in the proximity has not been appropriately analysed, neither has the role, if any, the west plays in strengthening authoritarian resilience (Allison, 2013; Koesel & Bunce, 2013).

### 2.2.2 Security or Democracy? EU's role in strengthening authoritarian resilience.

This thesis argues against the assumption that the beacons of the liberal democratic cause, Europe (The Union and its member states) and the United States do not necessarily promote the democratic cause in MENA like they seemed to do in central Europe and Eurasia. Instead, the west seems to prioritise its own interests in the region which has tended to strengthen authoritarian resilience instead. The first European Neighbourhood Policy (2003) begs the claim, that Europe does not inadvertently promote democratic values as evident in the text of the document. The text expresses hope in the democratic processes of East Europe it adopts a more pessimistic tone with regards to the South of Mediterranean. It prefers security and stability in the regimes which are conducive to European interests and democracy is not necessarily the prerequisite after all (Battaloglu & Farasin, 2017). In the post-communist societies promoting democratic norms can be argued for in the same manner, as democratic diffusion is likely to draw the recipient countries towards the west and away from its geopolitical rivals, China and Russia it could be concluded that democracy is used a security tool instead – in discourse and in practice. This

phenomenon has attracted interest from critical security studies as the west is accused to 'securitise' authoritarian regimes against the democratic movements (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Let us first chart out the policies adopted by the West, where the West refers to United States, EU and major western European powers as well. Because of the Cold War, the Arab states were divided on the spectrum of post-colonial monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait etc.) inclining towards the United States and the radical republics inclining towards the Soviet camp (Iran). However, as the unipolar order emerged the United States adopted a policy to influence the region according to their strategic interests, access to resources and promoting free-markets and liberal values (Krauthammer, 1990). In a sense, *realpolitik* prevailed over the ideals of promoting democracy and this trend continued ever since. Therefore, countries like Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt were prompted to adopt pro-democratic reforms and neo-liberal policies in the 90s and early 2000s (Jhaveri, 2004; Durac & Cavatorta, 2015: 243). The issue for western interests with promoting democracy in MENA has been the uncertainty elections provide and the fear of anti-western narratives (mainly adopted by Islamist groups) prevailing in electoral settings it would be counterproductive. Therefore, it is in interests of the foreign actors to have leaders in power who would ensure economic and political stability and would not go against their foreign partners. Arab autocrats played this role well. The September 11 attacks seemed to change western narratives towards democracy promotion with their support in intervening in Libya. Although, these narratives essentially became efforts of democracy promotion through war as seen in Iraq, Libya and Syria, all regimes which did not have close relations with the west. The consequences of the revolutions in 2011, provided yet another proof to the flow of US and European policy and the region and how it has developed ever since. Scholars have also argued for the western (EU, US, IMF) initiated policies of neoliberalism and privatisation as an overarching cause of the Arab Spring in

the first place. In the short term, the west distanced itself from friendly dictators and acknowledged the protests to the extent of intervening in Libya in favour of the protestors (However, it can be argued the intervention was against Gaddafi, rather than for the protestors). In Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist parties' Muslim brotherhood and Ennahda had won the first elections. Civil wars in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen did not feed into the longevity of the vision of democracy promotion either and the narratives quickly moved on towards securing stability. As autocrats Abdel Fateh Al-Sisi seized power in Egypt and created a more resilient autocracy with seemingly no improvement in the economy or social grievances, the west has in the years since strengthened its alliances in Egypt validating the security assumptions (Battaloglu & Farasin, 2017).

In particular to Europe, let us discuss the European policy towards the MENA region, confining it to the post Arab Spring political order. This is because literature observes that European actions have not changed much after the revolutions. Essentially, European Union and the member states adopted conservative policies, preferred to maintain the status quo in their southern neighbourhood, while promising democratic values, but securing their economic and social interests instead (Bicchi, 2013; Pace, 2009; Tocci & Cassarino, 2011). The unilateral relationships in Mediterranean have centrally focused on economic aspects with geopolitical and social aspects in the peripheries. From the perspective of European Union, the European External Action Service (EEAS) is the body which encompassed both Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 2009 and is directed to deal Europe's neighbours. EEAS comprises of officials from the European Commission, Council Secretariat and the diplomats from foreign ministries of the member states. However, much change in the Euro-Mediterranean relations was not observed. EEAS has been the primary institution designing European policies for Tunisia and Egypt; however, its response had been slow and inefficient (Bicchi, 2013). For Tunisia in particular,

EU and Tunisia have had a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) since 1998 which came with the conditions of democracy and rights promotion, and when Ben Ali regime was overthrown, similar promises were made (Bicchi, 2013). Furthermore, EU waited for the autocrats of Egypt and Tunisia to leave the country and to reassure that the regimes have been overthrown for certain, to acknowledge the ‘courage and determination’ of Tunisian and Egyptian people (Council of The European Union, 2011).

In discourse, trade and aid are fundamental parts of European interactions in the Mediterranean, however, this thesis would argue that in practice it is concerns of European security that take precedence. All partnerships come with conditionality biased towards EU values (Balfour, 2012), however it would be argued with empirical evidence in this thesis, if a recipient state ensured European security the partnerships would continue. The relevant EU conditionality is on the lines of trade liberalisation and privatisation not for rule of law, democracy and human rights. The rule of law, democracy and human rights concerns are presented in the strategy documents when it comes to MENA, but non-fulfilment of these conditions does not seem necessary for continued partnership with EU. This focus on trade-based relationships is based in the assumption that economic liberalisation would bring about political liberalisation, however, this claim has been refuted as evidence of ruling elite consolidating the gains of these partnerships exacerbating social tensions exists (Kadri, 2013). This thesis therefore argues that democracy promotion is not a priority for EU, the priorities are to secure its own interests, so that insecurities (economic, Islamist extremism and illegal migration) do not spill over into its own borders.

Therefore, the broader European effort towards its south differs from its efforts in its other neighbourhoods in the East after the Cold War and in the Balkans after the Yugoslavian civil war. Scholarship acknowledges that in those cases,

democracy promotion was a priority and the effects of which have been observed as well in democratic diffusion literature as well (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Kopstein & Reilly, 2000; Lankina & Getachew, 2006; O’Loughlin et al., 1998). As argued, there is precedence in the fact that European actors focused on securing their own economic interests, controlling migration and spread of violent extremism, preferring the status quo and in turn strengthening authoritarian resilience instead. Focusing on the democratic transition and the return of authoritarianism in Tunisia, this thesis attempts to test these claims.

## 2.3 Methodology, contributions and limitations

### 2.3.1 Methodology

This thesis would use the process tracing through discourse analysis methodology analysing international factors contributing to strengthening of autocratic values. The primary goal of the thesis is to identify how international actors have promoted an environment of authoritarian resilience through promoting their own interests over democratic ideals in Tunisia providing legitimacy to President Kais Saeid’s consolidation of his authoritarian rule. Therefore, this thesis would use process tracing approach through discourse analysis, with a focus on reasoning European Union’s contribution to the authoritarian shifts in Tunisia. Document and text analysis along with public discourse would be analysed out with a preference of statements, documents published by official sources and then to civil society and media content.

The research question focuses on the “European Union” its role in this process. A wide definition of what constitutes European Union is considered as discourse is constructed through interactions of multiple actors as well, a statement through different actors could contribute to the causality of the argument. The differences in the perspectives of different actors within the EU would be



acknowledged. A descriptive method is chosen because of the epistemological focus in acquiring knowledge in discourse and constructing of democratic transitions through interactions of actors and institutions involved.

To accomplish this goal, interactions of actors with different strata of Tunisian society, the civil society and the ruling elite would be analysed on issues pertaining to Tunisian local politics, trade agreements, and internal alliances with the ruling elite while also venturing into collecting evidence through civil society- media, activists, think tanks and conferences. Evidence from official EU documents, trade and diplomatic agreements, civil society interactions, expert opinions (academic papers, website articles, podcasts and interviews) along with statements made by political actors would be studied. The basic evidentiary requirement is to collect evidence which support different claims and providing a level of confidence.

#### 2.4 Contributions and Limitations

Through the analysis this thesis argues against the opinion that western actors can only act as promoters of democracy and the assumption that increased relations with west causes democratic diffusion, however, we propose to look at European Union as an actor which prefers authoritarian stability over insecurity in its economic and strategic interests. Secondly, adds a contribution on the literature of the democratic and authoritarian diffusion that brings these divergent concepts into a spectrum in analytical framework, with an aim to conceptualise the transitory processes in a coherent manner in either side of the democratic spectrum, opening doors for added research. Methodologically, this thesis adopts process tracing approach for democratic and authoritarian consolidation, contributing to the field of literature (Ambrosio & Tolstrup, 2019; Bloor and Bloor, 2007; Fairclough, 2013). Empirically, the recency of the case which had been unique in sustaining democracy after the Arab spring for over a

decade provides the opportunity to study a country which has experienced peaceful democratic transition and a peaceful democratic reversal within a decade.

However, this research is limited in its scope of being a master's thesis, therefore access to the data is limited, open-source data would be used and multi-language research tools such as google translate would be used to translate documents in other languages. A large number of official EU and Tunisian government documents, speeches and interviews were found in French or Arabic, wherever translation was not available, Google automated translations have been used. The case-selection also presents limitations, firstly, not all international actors are covered. European member states and United States are not included to a large extent in this thesis. Authoritarian hegemons like Russia and China have not been included and because of having broad definitions of the West and the MENA could limit the focus on one actor and dilute the analysis. Therefore, it is important to assert that a variety of other actors and circumstances would also contribute to EU's discourse towards Tunisia and Tunisia's own democratic experience.

Lastly, it is also important to assert that the situation in Tunisia is developing on a constant basis, therefore a cut off point for information sources has been taken as 20<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

### 3. The Decade of Democracy

The next section covers the discourse from the transitional phase of Tunisian democracy, from the first constitution assembly and elections in 2011, the process of drafting the constitution and the first parliamentary elections in 2014. Therefore, this section is divided into two different parts, firstly, the evolution of political parties and new rivalries, the new civil society and the new the government institutions. Secondly, EU's discourse would be charted out in conjunction, to combine and evaluate apparent impact of international discourse on the development of the Tunisian democracy in its nascent stages.

#### 3.1 The Initial Transition and New Actors - Domestic Discourse

##### 3.1.1 The New Political Elite and the 2011 Election

In January 2011, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, the long ruling autocrat handed over executive power to his interim president and fled the country. However, the protests demanded for dismantling of the regime, with the resignations of the parliament, the prime minister Mohammed Ghannouchi and a new constitution to follow (CNN, 2011). The ruling leaders either resigned or increasingly distanced themselves from the old regime, creating a vacuum for a new political elite to emerge through the constitution assembly and the upcoming elections (Black, 2011). Acts of 'activated citizenship' along with civil Society actors were internally an imposing factor for the revolution to ensure that a new constitution was adopted. In particular, High Commission for the Realisation of Revolution Objectives, Political Reform and Democratic Transition (HIROR), led by Yadh ben Achour was the temporary independent institution filled the institutional void left by the parliament in 2011 and provided the framework for

the setting up of the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) which would elect the NCA through elections in October 2011 (Kefi, 2015).

The first half of 2011 created space for new voices to emerge, however, consolidation of power would emerge gradually in the years since. The ‘new’ elite were not career politicians, rather technocrats who had managed to keep a distance from the Ben Ali regime and were in positions to be able to exercise power (Black, 2011). Fouad Mebazaa, the Speaker of Chamber of Deputies, assumed the duties of Prime Minister on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2011 and Béji Caïd Essebsi, a veteran leader from pre-independence era, who had retired from politics in 1991, returned in early March, until the elections to form the interim government were to take place. Both Mebazaa and Essebsi were charged to govern the country as the elections for the constituent assembly would take place. Moreover, a ban was imposed on the senior members of the Ben Ali’s Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), the political party which had been the extension of the former dictator’s powers and the activists themselves policed the candidate lists strictly to restrict the former regime members to participate in the drafting of the constitution (Ryan, 2011; Black, 2011). Eventually, 111 parties were registered to participate in the country’s first free election since its independence, most of which were formed after the announcement of the elections in March 2011 (Ryan, 2011). The leading party emerged to be Rached Ghannouchi’s moderate Islamist party, Ennahda. The Ennahda 2011 campaign was based on pro-democratic values with promising to respect Tunisia’s diversity and secular identity and uphold strong women’s rights and education systems in the region (Ryan, 2011). Other prominent parties to emerge with a share of political power in the assembly were the centre-left secular social democratic party Ettakatol which had been in opposition in the Ben Ali era, centrist secular parties such as the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and the Congress for the Republic (CPR) as well (Black, 2011).

Ennahda's instant popularity became a point of contention for the rest of the opposition and therefore, the primary debates in the elections were divided on the ideological battles between the secularists and Islamists especially when it came to women's rights (Ryan, 2011; Gumuchian, 2011). For instance, the Ben Ali regime had imposed a ban on wearing Hijab in government buildings and after the revolution and the apparent re-emergence of Islamist groups in the country meant that the while Islamists advocated for a change in status quo, secularists saw rise of Islamism as a threat to the advanced rights for women, in the region as a threat of Islamisation of the country (Gumuchian, 2011). This is just one example of the divisiveness in the new Tunisian democracy, however, Ennahda leaders maintained the view that unlike other Islamist parties in the Arab World, they maintained a moderate view, they saw women as important parts of nation-building and decision-making, while also providing rights to women, and all citizens to exercise their religion in the public sphere. At the same time, the release of the Iranian movie 'Persepolis' which depicted an image of 'God', which was considered blasphemous by Islamist dialogues and protestors. As the Islamist voice had remerged after decades of suppression, the Tunisian society now needed to find a place for Political Islam in the new democratic system it aspired to (France24, 2012). The two major groupings, which emerged in the form of secularists and Islamists also engaged in allegations of illegal campaign funding, with secularists accusing Ennahda of being funded by the Gulf states, fearing a spread of stringent Wahhabi and Salafi ideas to flow in Tunisia (Kefi, 2015). However, Ennahda refuted any such claims and while the contention remained a point of debate until the elections, these allegations were not proved.

Another fault line that emerged during the first constituent assembly elections was the type of government different parties would advocate for in the new constitution, a parliamentary model with a strong Prime Minister as in England and Germany or a semi-presidential republic resembling France or the United

States. Ennahda leaders advocated for a strong parliamentary model, whereas other parties like the PDP and the CPR advocated for a semi-presidential republic. These decisions were seen as the institutional structures of the country for decades to come, and distribution of power was an essential element in the new constitution. EU election observers reported similar issues in their review of the elections in October 2011 (EEAS, 2011). While they classified the election procedures in most constituencies 'good' or 'very good', they also reported a fragmentation of the political order illustrated by the 1,517 candidate lists (EEAS, 2011). However, this being the first free elections for the country and a large list of independent candidates, this could be seen as a sign of support of the people towards democratic transitions. Institutionally, the observer's report alluded that Instances régionales des élections (IRE – Regional Electoral Bodies) and Tribunaux de Première Instance (TPI – Tribunal of First Instance) to not apply similar conditions for refusal or acceptance of candidates during the registration process. Whereas the administrative court (TA - Tribunal Administratif) was commended for its transparency and respecting the rules and procedures for the elections (EEAS, 2011). Broadly, the elections were largely reported to be peaceful, with media's role was labelled 'positive' as well. The EU observers noted the media as an actor to move on from the past as well, the coverage was classified 'neutral' and despite the large number of candidate lists, the EU observers found that media coverage addressed all the concerns and ideas that were being campaigned in the election. However, it was also noted that Ennahda, did receive the most media coverage from foreign media, with France24 (Arabic) devoting the most time to the party and Al Jazeera being relatively equal.

Eventually, Ennahda emerged as the single largest party in the elections winning 89 seats and near 37% vote in the 217 assembly. Ennahda was followed by CPR (29 seats, 8.70% vote share), Popular Petition (26 seats, 6.92% vote share), Ettakatol (20 seats, 7.04% vote share) and PDP (16 seats, 3.96% vote share).

Following the NCA elections, a coalition government was established in December 2011 and Moncef Marzouki was elected president by the NCA, and he stayed in the post until 2014. Referred to as the Troika government, it consisted of Ennahda, the Congrès pour la République (CPR), and Ettakatol. On December 24, 2011, President Marzouki officially appointed Hamadi Jebali from Ennahda as the Prime Minister. As Ennahda was the majority party at that time, most of the crucial ministries were allocated to Ennahda members, except for the Ministry of Defence.

However, the coalition between Ennahda, CPR, and Ettakatol led to the loss of many party members and followers for both CPR and Ettakatol. This coalition option had not been explicitly communicated during their electoral campaigns, causing disappointment among many young members and supporters, particularly within Ettakatol. These individuals had actively participated in the revolution, advocating for increased freedom, rights, social equality, and professional opportunities. They felt betrayed by the party leadership, perceiving them as overly accommodating towards Ennahda politicians and their political objectives. Furthermore, leftist and smaller progressive parties, often unified under the umbrella of the Democratic Modernist Pole (PDM), did not achieve the electoral success they had anticipated.

### 3.1.2 The National Dialogue

The first step towards democracy had been taken in 2011 however, the political cleavage of secularism and Islamism and poor economic performance of the transitional government was transferred to the NCA. Moreover, along with its legislative duties NCA struggled with adopting unrealistic deadlines without appropriate planning, the non-coordination of sub-commissions working independently without official roadmaps or deadlines. Additionally, the internal political imbalances in the NCA due to constantly shifting alliances and

preferences acted as a hindrance in adopting a coordinated approach (The Carter Centre, 2014). Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali proposed the establishment of a new "technocrat government" (Schäfer, 2015). Additionally, a Council of Elders, consisting of approximately 16 individuals primarily supportive of the Islamist movement but also including representatives from influential Tunisian families, such as Ahmed Mestiri and Yadh Ben Achour, was created. General Rachid Ammar served as an observer on the council. Up until this point, Jebali, as the head of government, and Rached Ghannouchi, as the head of the Ennahda party, had effectively shared their responsibilities (Schäfer, 2015).

However, Ghannouchi and the Conseil de la Choura did not endorse the idea of a technocrat government and sought to retain exclusive control of power and key ministries for Ennahda. Consequently, Jebali resigned on February 19, 2013, when his proposal failed to materialize, and Ennahda's Ali Laarayedh was appointed the interim Prime-Minister (*BBC News*, 2013). The lack of outreach, communication and absenteeism was cited as a cause for public mistrust which peaked around August 2013, after the assassination of NCA members Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi. By middle of 2013, large crowds took to the streets in protests the poor economic performance, non-improvement of socio-economic indicators (employment, inflation) and rise in violent extremism and terrorism. Hence, NCA was suspended, and it was the essential role of *the quartet*, the group of four civil society organisations that mediated the roadmap for constitution adoption setting up the National Dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The quartet comprised of The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT, *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*); The Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA, *Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat*); The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH, *La Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme*); The Tunisian Order of Lawyers (*Ordre National des Avocats de Tunisie*). The quartet was awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for its "decisive contribution in building a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution in 2011" (Nobel Peace Prize, 2015).



Maboudi (2019) suggested that while, public participation was a key element and it provided legitimacy to the ‘participatory democracy’ and had a significant effect on the content of the constitution. The drafting process also invited recommendations from the public sphere, more than 2,500 citizen proposals were received and 43% of the proposals were included in the final draft (Maboudi, 2019). However, the US based Carter foundation criticised the working groups of the NCA for lacking the coordination with the civil society (The Carter Centre, 2014). Civil society organisations addressed these shortcomings of the NCA by organising town hall meetings and information sessions for the public and underlining the inconsistencies and limitations of successive drafts (The Carter Centre, 2014). However, these meetings became victims of ensuing polarisation of political discourse and increasingly attracted audiences from specific ideologies skewing the elements of public debate and discussion. Nevertheless, as stated, public proposals did find a place in the constitution mainly for reflecting public demands for rights and freedoms over other matters of economy, foreign policy and such. On January 29, 2014, Ennahda relinquished power and a technocrat government led by Mehdi Jomaa, a former Minister of Industry known for his impartiality, was officially appointed. The Jomaa government remained in power for approximately one year until December 31, 2014.

Zemni (2015) argues that this transitory period between 2011-2014 did not just mean reshuffling of state institutions and the elite, however it is conceptualised as ‘extraordinary politics’ where the society itself is reconstituting and through a participatory system it is influencing the state. Hence, the ideological cleavages that have given instability to NCA and the alliances, reflect the cleavages in the society, something Tunisian people are addressing for themselves. Therefore, this practice of large-scale public participation in constitution becomes a part of the process of democratic learning, where societal actors participated and adopted democratic practices which had been absent in

the societal memory. In sense, this was the moment when Tunisian society was experiencing learning of critical democratic values (Brownlee, 2007). Civil society actors had managed to enshrine themselves in the process of state-building and became essential parts of the society at the time. A rather elaborate analysis of how this experience would contribute to the explaining the steps taken by Kais Saied since 2020.

### 3.1.3 The Second Republic – A New Dawn

After putting the constitution in force in January 2014, the next elections were held in December 2014. Former prime minister Essebsi, who had been the interim prime minister in 2011 until the NCA was elected, formed a new party Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia), a secular party which won plurality in the first parliamentary election, and consequently in the first presidential election, electing Beji Caid Essebsi as the first democratically elected President of Tunisia. Nidaa Tounes would go on to become the most prominent voice in the secular ideologues in the Tunisian society with Ennahda being the more conservative moderate Islamist voice. Nidaa Tounes gained majority vote winning 86 seats while Ennahda came in second with 69 seats. However, forming and approving a government was the next challenge and it took three months to approve the first cabinet which included representation from a plethora of political parties, including a minister from the opposition Ennahda. Moreover, the choice of Essebsi to appoint Habib Essid, who had been a part of the erstwhile Ben Ali government received criticism (France24, 2015). Essid was subsequently replaced within six months through a vote of no-confidence in July 2016 due to President Essebsi's demands of a unity government, poor economic performance, extremism and rising social tensions on the back of the 'worst violence since the Arab Spring' in his six-month tenure (Middle East Eye, 2016; DW, 2016). Ennahda, Afek Tounes, Popular Front had all expressed discontent on Essid's proposed cabinet which according to other political parties

had not been 'inclusive'. Essid's appointment had been argued by the opponents to be a way for the President "to circumvent that expectation and appropriate more powers than the Constitution confers to him" (Mekki, 2015). With ouster of Habib Essid, Nidaa Touness's Youssef Chahed was appointed as the Prime Minister under the National Unity government following another cabinet reshuffle.

However, it was with the Youssef Chahed's parliament that several questions against Tunisia's democratic future started to appear. The cabinet adopted the Catharge Agreement (اتفاق قرطاج) in July 2016 because of a series of meetings between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, for both the parties to function smoothly and eventually also included other political parties and civil society organisations to establish a framework for cooperative governance (Catharge Agreement, 2016). The Carthage Agreement established six broad priorities – combatting terrorism; encouraging development, growth, and work; fighting corruption; ordering public finances; decentralization; and increasing government efficiency. However, the first risk of the agreement was the noticeable restructuring of the political elite within the parliament and important civil society actors in one grouping, creating space for marginalisation of the rest of the opposition and non-signatories of the agreement. However, the second and more important concern came in the implementation of the agreement. Chahed's war against corruption could be seen as a precursor to the strategy Kais Saied would seemingly adopt in the next years. Now, corruption was listed as the third priority in the agreement and Chahed was not expected to double down on this priority over the others because his allies, signatories and his own party had been entertaining questions of dubious funding (Cherif, 2017). However, with the arrests of politicians Chafik Jarraya in May 2017 followed by former presidential candidate Yassine Chennoufi, the leader of Free Patriotic Union Slim Riahi and eight other businessmen (Shams FM, 2017; Middle East Monitor, 2017). Chahed had attacked the elite on his own accord,

through the National Guard as opposed to the police, over allegations of corruption, sending arms to Libya and endangering Tunisia's national security. Furthermore, these arrests were not authorised by the *القطب القضائي و النيابة* (The Office of Judiciary and Prosecution) as reported in an interview by an official to Shams FM (2017). The critics argued that the people Chahed had been tackling were the politicians and businesspeople who had accumulated wealth after the Arab Spring, hence the 'emerging elite' however, the wealth and activities of the pre-revolution elite remained untouched (ICG, 2017). Others argued that this war against corruption had just been a political move to convince the people of his own capabilities, creating a discourse of action and securitising the interests of Tunisian people. However, these arrests received popular support, Chahed's support within his government, his party and with his president weakened. This led to a divide between Nidaa Touness and the beginning of another parliamentary turmoil between the Essebsi camp and Chahed Camp in the years to come.

The important point to note here is that Chahed took measures bypassing Tunisian institutions, against his own government and despite that he received popular acclaim, this was a sign that authoritarian character of the state had not diminished. And continued turmoil within the parliament led to increasing mistrust amongst the people towards democracy as visible in just 33% voter turnout in Tunisia's first elections (Fanack, 2019). Apart from the war on corruption the increased scrutiny of the NGOs was another step detrimental towards the health of the democracy in its infancy. This political turmoil and allegations of the President appropriating more powers is reminiscent of Tunisian experience of authoritarianism and thus, highlights the mistrust between political parties and the fears of a return of authoritarian strengthening already in the immediate period after the first parliamentary election. The debate of parliamentary and presidential form of the republic seems to have flowed into the discourse even after the adoption of the constitution and the fears of

authoritarian consolidation were expressed as early as 2015 (M'Barek, 2016). Incidentally, then media personality and constitutional law professor Kais Saied was amongst the first to express his concerns (Shemsfm, 2016).

Thus far, this chapter has attempted to chart a discourse around the major events in Tunisia's transition, highlighting the political cleavages and the active role of the civil society in accelerating a constitution building process that had become a victim of NCA infighting. Through the key concerns within Tunisia, the discourse on Tunisia's democratic transition in EU would be analysed until 2019 and how did the western discourse influence the domestic discourse in Tunisia. However, before that, a brief review of first cycle of the Tunisian government presents the following takeaways which build a platform to answer the research question:

- A. The key concerns expressed by the protestor's political parties, the media and the people of Tunisia in the decade of democracy had been a failing economy and rising unemployment; increase in social tensions within the country, corruption and the influx of Islamic State's violent activities.
- B. Mistrust amongst the major political parties and the difficulties to reach a consensus. The constant reshuffling of the parliament ever since the 2011 NCA elections has contributed to the mistrust amongst people towards the direction the country was headed (Arab Barometers Survey, 2019). The parliamentary discourse created an environment of questioning the democratic model that Tunisia had adopted at the time.

### 3.2 What did EU do?

European Union (EU) is one of the more important international partners for Tunisia because of the influence it has historically, through strong ties with Ben

Ali regime by virtue of which, EU has been overwhelmingly the biggest trade partner for Tunisia, with more than half of total trade for Tunisia has been through EU over the past decade. Moreover, more than 80% Tunisians living abroad lived in Europe, mainly France and Italy in 2015. Therefore, the discursive rhetoric created by EU, and actual practices it adopts make different impacts on both Tunisian politics and society. However, it has been an academic consensus that EU prioritised economic and security interests over democracy and human rights as it strengthened its relations with the Ben Ali regime (Huber, 2012). This is exemplified with the fact that Tunisia was one of the first countries to adopt EU advocated neoliberal reforms in the nineties (Durac & Cavatorta, 2012). EU commended the efforts of the regime despite these reforms leading to deteriorating socio-economic situation in the country. EU maintained relative silence on the human rights violations and suppression as it strengthened its financial assistance for the regime. Following the revolutions, EU parliament issued criticism to this approach as well (European Parliament, 2011). Individually, the member states went one step further, with France offering security assistance to Ben Ali to resist the revolution in the early stages of the revolution (Le Point, 2011). As a matter of fact, these reforms were arguably the cause for the Jasmine revolution in 2011 (Durac & Cavatorta, 2012; Huber, 2012). Therefore, this section attempts to analyse European policies affecting Tunisia following the revolution, critically charting the discourse and influence on Tunisian politics, society and economy and whether the European Union changed its approach during Tunisia's decade of democracy and furthermore build a platform for the analysis of EU's approach with the authoritarian turn of 2020.

### 3.2.1 Deep Democracy

In 2011, as the transition of Tunisian and Egyptian regimes became increasingly apparent and following the criticisms by civil society and European Parliament,

the new rhetoric presented commitment to the notions of 'deep democracy' and 'positive conditionality'. In her column in the Guardian, Former EU High Representative/Vice President (EU/VP) Catherine Ashton, defined deep democracy as a commitment to - political reform, elections, institution building, fight against corruption, independent judiciary and support to civil society (Ashton, 2011). She differentiated the notions of deep and surface democracy, emphasizing that while democracy encompasses votes and elections, it goes beyond mere electoral processes. According to her, Europe's experience has taught them the importance of fostering 'deep democracy', which involves upholding the rule of law, ensuring freedom of speech, maintaining an independent judiciary, and promoting an impartial administration. Additionally, it requires the establishment of enforceable property rights and the existence of free trade unions. In her view, democracy was not solely about changing governments but also about constructing the necessary institutions and cultivating the appropriate mindsets. Ultimately, she warned that 'surface democracy'—where individuals freely participate in elections and select their government—would prove unsustainable if 'deep democracy' fails to take root (Ashton, 2011). Therefore, the notion of deep democracy was advocated to be the guiding principle for future EU policy. Moreover, in her official remarks at the Senior officials' meeting on Egypt and Tunisia on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2011, she did not refer to the fallen regimes as autocratic and at best fleetingly acknowledged the characters of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt saying, "Events in the region show that the 'old stability' wasn't working. That is why we need to build a new 'sustainable stability'" (EU, 2011). However, as we investigate the statements made by the office of HR/VP published in the next three years, there is no mention of the term 'deep democracy' anymore (Add more sources).

In policy documents published by different institutions within the EU after 2011, deep democracy did not receive appropriate attention as was promised by the

HR/VP. The privileged partnership which made way for the Action Plan (2013-17) gave one direct mention to the concept of deep democracy (approfondissement de la démocratie)<sup>3</sup> followed by singular mentions in the subsequent European Neighbourhood Instrument (2014-20) (EEAS, 2014) and Singular Support Framework. These documents mention the concept in their introductory remarks however refrain from elaborating on the same, signalling that the concept did not become a guiding principle for EU policy and remained a discursive tool for the Union. It is important to mention however, the key features of the concept as defined by HR/VP Ashton in her article in *The Guardian* do find separate spaces in the EU policy, although not comprehensively. Gomez and Nugol (2017) in their report on EU democracy promotion in the European Commission funded project highlight that Foreign Affairs Council resolutions do not include the concept in their definitions as well. In an interview recorded in Gomez and Nugol (2017), an EU official source based in Tunisia said when asked about the elements of ‘deep democracy’ in the EU strategy said, ‘We work on those issues, but not strategically or holistically’.

However, the EU increased funding to Tunisia in these years, this funding was distributed in a similar manner it had in the years prior to the revolution. It had focused on market reform with the argument that market reforms would usher in democratic changes. This neoliberal approach or as Vicky Reynaert (2015) called it ‘fuzzy liberalism’ includes a narrow conception of democracy promotion and had not improved from the shortcomings of the previous decades. According Reynaert, the preference of EU remained to integrate Tunisia (and Egypt) into the EU internal market, through which it hoped to aid

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<sup>3</sup> ‘[A]pporter une aide accrue aux partenaires s’engageant dans l’approfondissement de la démocratie et dans le respect de l’Etat de droit, des droits de l’Homme, des libertés fondamentales et de l’égalité des genres’, Relations Tunisie - Union Européenne: Un partenariat privilégié. Plan d’Action 2013-2017 (hereinafter referred to as The Action Plan 2013-2017) 3. Original in French, translation by Google Translate.



the democratic processes in the country, without withstanding the fact, that this policy had been counterproductive before. Furthermore, the focus of these key instruments was border security, migration control and reform of state administrative capacities.

### 3.2.2 Financial Instruments

Moving on, Tunisia benefitted from an influx of funding through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) to the amounts of 445 million Euros between 2011-14 including funds 155 million Euros under the Support for Partnership, Reforms and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) programme for which, Tunisia was the first country to receive funding under this programme which was established because of the Arab Spring. Additionally, Tunisia received over 700 million Euros under the Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) which implies that major sources of funding within the ENI were directed towards economic reforms over democratic and social reforms. The division of European funding therefore further highlights the differences in the discourse and implementation of European strategies.

25 May 2022	<a href="#">EU disburses €300 million in Macro-Financial Assistance to support the Tunisian people</a>
1 June 2021	<a href="#">EU disburses €460 million in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia</a>
11 August 2020	<a href="#">Coronavirus: Eight macro-financial assistance programmes agreed to support enlargement and neighbourhood partners</a>
30 October 2019	<a href="#">EU approves €150 million disbursement in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia</a>

24 June 2019	<a href="#">EU approves €150 million disbursement in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia</a>
09 October 2017	<a href="#">EU approves €200 million disbursement in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia</a>
20 July 2017	<a href="#">EU disburses €100 million in assistance to Tunisia</a>
10 July 2017	<a href="#">Commission approves disbursement of €100 million in assistance to Tunisia</a>
27 April 2017	<a href="#">European Union signs EUR 500 million assistance programme with Tunisia</a>
12 February 2016	<a href="#">Commission proposes further €500m in macro-financial assistance</a>
01 December 2015	<a href="#">EU disburses 100 million euros in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia</a>
07 May 2015	<a href="#">EU disburses 100 million euros in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia</a>
15 April 2015	<a href="#">EU approves disbursement of EUR 100 million in Macro-Financial Assistance to Tunisia</a>
04 September 2014	<a href="#">€300 million Macro-Financial Assistance package signed</a>

Table 3.1 – MFA funding to Tunisia

Source: Economy and Finance, European Commission: 2023

However, European investment in election monitoring, funding infrastructure and resources, and services (medical, legal, psychological) is one positive change observed from their policies before the revolution. Establishment of the European Observer Mission (EOM), the report of which has been mentioned in the section above played a role in legitimising the initial phases of elections within the country. But when compared with HR/VP Ashton's separation of deep democracy and surface democracy, these actions clearly fall into the paradigm of 'surface democracy' and while it provides a legitimising element

to the electoral processes it fails to establish conditions for deep democracy in the country.

### 3.2.3 Positive Conditionality

The principle of positive conditionality or ‘more for more’ means that every bit of consequent EU funding is contingent on the progress made after the previous rounds of investment. This element has been a part of EU programmes in its neighbourhood, spanning back to the nineties with the enlargement processes with the Central European states (Balfour, 2012). It had also been an element in EU’s southern neighbourhood, for instance, in the Association Agreement signed with Tunisia in 1995 with the text reading, ‘shall be based on respect for human rights and democratic principles which guide their domestic and international policies and constitute an essential element of the Agreement’. After the revolution, EU maintained an emphasis on the positive conditionality in the funds disbursed through SPRING, umbrella and MFA funds, however, these documents lacked a monitoring system to validate the fulfilment of conditions of democracy and human rights of these conditions (Gomez & Nugol, 2017). The monitoring and validation systems were established in the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Tunisia and EU in 2014, included conditions for Tunisia to fulfil and every MFA cycle has included these assessments.

The impact assessments have acknowledged the regular political crises since 2014 (mentioned in the previous sections), however the crises have not been the deciding factor in European Commission’s assessment with a minimal importance to the slow but steady rate of transition. For instance, the assessment of the first MFA – I, the deciding factors have been advances in the socio-economic reforms. More evidently, the second MFA political reforms assessment report submitted by the European External Action Service to the European Commission mentions of ‘short-term authoritarian reflexes’, ‘use of

torture in detention’ and ‘resistance of the elite towards democratic consolidation’ (EEAS, 2016). Despite acknowledging these experiences, the commission is advised to have fulfilled the conditions set forth for its ‘uniqueness in experience’ when compared to the other states in the middle east. This impact assessment resonates with the EU’s assessments of ‘positive conditionality’ in the nineties, as Rosa Balfour (2012) has argued that despite a poor record in human rights Tunisia was one of the first partners of the EU to agree to the ENP Action Plan and due to its advances in economic liberalisation advocated by the European Union, continued to receive support from the Tunisian government.

This nature of implementation of the ‘more for more’ can be criticised for its inconsequential nature, as even though conditions are fulfilled underlying criticality in EU decision making is missing. The message that goes through implies that if the conditions of European security and economic interests would take precedence as long as Tunisia continues a journey of linear democratisation without commenting on the commitment of the political authorities to the rule of law and democracy. The idea of Tunisia as a success story can be argued has been detrimental to the development of strong democratic institutions as it overlooks the issues within the Tunisian institutions such as rampant corruption and attempts at power concentration by President Essebsi and later Prime Minister Youssef Chahed as discussed in the previous chapter. These negative points have not been leveraged by the EU through its financing instruments as funding has continued to increase, without consequences since the revolution (Table 3.1). This signified the ‘more of the same’ or ‘old wine in new bottles’ idea (Colombo & Tocci, 2012).

### **Money, Market and Mobility (3Ms)**

The previous part talks about the absence of certain features within EU ‘more for more’ approach, the conditions which are essential are the 3M’s Money, Market and Mobility. However, Tunisian civil society has criticised the three elements as potentially being negative for the human rights situation within the country.

Firstly, for Market, the EU-Tunisia Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) which has thus far had three rounds of negotiations one each in 2016, -18 and -19. In a joint report to the United Nations, the concerns expressed by the Tunisian civil society were that it may impact Tunisia’s food security, right to work conditions and the national industry. Tunisian economy had been an export-based economy and fears of that changing were expressed (OHCHR, 2016).<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, in the Tunisia’s systematic country diagnostic by the World Bank of 2022, it has been presented that the share of exporting industries in food manufacturing and textiles, important contributors to the employment and output for Tunisia traditional has declined since the revolution. Net contribution of the trade which had been 49% on average in the period of 1991-2010, had become -7% of GDP in value terms.

Secondly, in terms of mobility, the conditions on mobility and managing migratory flows, readmission, border control in the EU Tunisia Mobility Partnership, the conditions for MFA, Spring and the ENI agreements, have been criticised to give state more control. The lack of transparency in the signing of the Mobility partnership has been another source of criticism for the agreement (Euro-Med Rights, 2014).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rapport alternatif de la société civile tunisienne au Pacte International Relatif aux Droits Économiques, Sociaux et Culturels–Août 2016, Original in French, translated by Google Translate

<sup>5</sup> The Euro-Med statement was signed in conjunction with the most important civil society organisations within Tunisia, namely - Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT); Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH); Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES); Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (TADW); Coordination of the Forum for Tunisian Immigration (FTCR – ADF- UTIT – AIDDA – COLLECTIF 3C – UTAC –

Lastly, for Money, becomes problematic because the conditionality to receive EU funding hinges on certain economic conditions and disbursement from the IMF, without giving Tunisian government an opportunity to form its own economic model. This creates a necessary dependence on economic support from both EU and IMF in the form MFA loans, which continue to pile up. These loans, which follow positive conditionality, again minimally comply with the conditions of socio-economic development creating a cyclical form of dependence on EU.

### 3.2.4 EU Norm Translation in political sphere in Tunisia (Weilandt, 2020) –

The translation of the experience with the EU has transferred in Tunisia differently in different political ideologies, however, the Tunisian political elite create their own discursive apparatus to maintain the obligations that are put forth by the European Union. Weilandt's discourse analysis (Weilandt, 2022) of EU norm contestation in Tunisia between 2015-19 suggests that there is broad acceptance of all EU norms in the post revolution EU society. Most norms find proponents in some sections of the Tunisian society, they also find contestation from other sections of the society. In charting out the domestic discourse within Tunisia, this thesis has exhibited in the previous chapter that the Tunisian society is not monolithic, multiple ideological and political divisions are testament to the fact. It is these political cleavages of the Tunisian society, where norm acceptance differs – amongst Islamists, secular conservatives and secular progressives.

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ZEMBRA – ATNF – ATML – FILIGRANES – ACDR – UTS – CAPMED – CFT – YOUNGA); Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN); European Association for the Defense of Human Rights (AEDH); International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH); Migreurop; Solidar

- i. Islamists – Islamists have been represented by the Ennahda movement led by Rached Ghannouchi. While Tunisian society has more political and non-political Islamist ideologues, Ennahda has been the most representative in the public sphere exhibited by its continued performance in the Tunisian elections since 2011, until 2019. Of the three groups mentioned, the Islamist Ennahda is the most supportive of EU economic norms of market liberalisation and closer economic relations with the neighbours in the north (Weilandt, 2022). They are the key proponents of the EU Tunisia DCFTA, which has been in negotiations for seven years now.

However, the Islamists are also the diametrically opposed to the social and civic norms promoted by the EU, namely on the issues opposed to the Islamic traditions such as gender rights and LGBTQ rights. They advocated for women to be referred to as ‘complementary’ rather than ‘equal’ to men in the constitution drafting process (Jeune Afrique, 2014) and objecting the inheritance law and the law to allow Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men (France24, 2017).<sup>6</sup> While Ennahda has advocate itself as ‘moderate Islamists’ or ‘Muslim democrats’, it maintains that the democratic institutions of Tunisia should be built with an Islamic world view. It is worth noting that more than two-thirds of the Tunisian population agreed with Ennahda’s stance in these constitutional debates (IRI). They compare themselves to Christian Democrats in Germany (Deutschlandfunk, 2011) arguing for Tunisian state to reflect Islam in its character.

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<sup>6</sup> In the constitution (2014), all women were equal ‘before’ the law, however not ‘in’ the law. This had left unanswered questions on the inheritance law. Shari’a law does not give equal rights on inheritance to women, thus this cleavage was avoided in the constitutional text, however it resurfaced with the debates on amending the inheritance law.

- ii. Secular Progressives – The second group is the group with the least political power, the key actors in this ideological grouping have played important normative role in the Tunisian democratic discourse. The grouping includes civil society organisations such as the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and young activists. While the former played a fundamental role in establishing the National Dialogue and thus, the constitution, the latter were the key actors of the Jasmine revolution and drivers of change. The most prominent political voice is the Popular Front. In interviews included by Weilandt (2022), the ‘secular progressives’ accept the EU civic, social and institutional norms to the extent they do not consider them to be ‘European’ rather ‘universal’ and thus advocate a complete overhaul of the Tunisian system in line with human rights and democracy.

However, they do not agree with the European model of market expansion and present vehemently opposed the DCFTA. After the first round of negotiations, leftist European MEPs and the Popular Front released joint statements opposing the agreement and their resolve to prevent the agreement to go through because it was detrimental for human rights of the Tunisian people (‘Our MEPs & Tunisian Popular Front Join Forces against New Trade Agreement’, 2015).

- iii. Secular Conservatives – This third grouping is one of the popular groupings and includes Essebsi’s Nidaa Touness and its offshoot Youssef Chahe’s Tahya Touness, arguably Kais Saied himself and the newly formed Free Destourian Party. The secular conservatives sympathise with Tunisia’s authoritarian past and derive their ideology from the achievements from the Ben Ali and Bourguiba era. A Tunisian businessman states in an interview in 2019 included in



Weilandt (2022), that while EU's institutional norms were generally favourable Tunisia was not ready for a democratic transition. They believe EU social norms were 'guaranteed' before 2011, and the rise of Islamists in the political sphere was a threat to the same. They favour strong autocratic leaders in parliament, elements which surfaced during the peak years of Nidaa Touness, and power grabs by Essebsi and Chahed respectively.

They are argued to prefer European 'way of life' over 'European values' reminiscent of the pre 2011 system as freedom of speech and expression, while favourable give a platform for Islamists. Therefore, in the secular conservative camp, there is a resistance towards social and democratic reforms and inclination towards an autocratic system.

In terms of economic norms of EU, the perception is complex and depends on the benefits it provides to different actors in the camp. If EU norms are favourable towards them, they are likely to accept otherwise not. This again is reminiscent of the previous eras, where economic liberalisation accompanied with patron clientelism provided opportunities to the old elite to consolidate their economic gains.

## 4. The Authoritarian Turn (2021-present)

### 4.1 Domestic Discourse

#### 4.1.1 Election of Kais Saied

The first parliamentary and the presidential terms of Tunisia's second republic were marred by infighting and corruption as discussed in the chapters before. The rise and fall of Nidaa Touness (Fanack, 2019), was characterised by the party and the president's weak alliances with the Ennahda movement, allegations of coup attempts, allegations corruption and terrorism (Al Monitor, 2018) created Tunisian people's mistrust towards the political elite.

In 2019, the untimely death of the first democratically elected president of Tunisia, Beji Caïd Essebsi prompted Tunisian people to vote in three different elections in the space of a month (Carter Centre, 2019). These three elections were the parliamentary election, the presidential election and the presidential runoff between September-October 2019. Carter Centre election observation mission reported the elections to have been conducted peacefully and democratically and the result of which was the election of independent candidate and retired constitutional lawyer, Kais Saied as the second President of Tunisia's second republic. Kais Saied had contested on an anti-elitist stance, promising an overhaul of the political system to fight corruption. Saied enjoyed popular and international support receiving commendations from civil society and international partners alike (BBC, 2019). Quotes like, "Saied is clean and represents us. We know very well that he does not have a magic wand" (BBC, 2019) by young Tunisian voters along with his electoral performance signified his popular approval. A constitutional law expert, Kais Saied had never run for office before, however had made public experiences on television debates and

participated in the constitution making process (Al Jazeera, 2019). He held a reputation amongst the students at University of Tunis where he taught ‘as a man of principle who welcomed disagreement’ (Al Jazeera, 2019). His use of Modern Standard Arabic and his demeanour earned him the nickname ‘Robocop’ amongst young Tunisians. Therefore, while Kais Saied was not a politician, he was a public figure and was known for his criticisms of the previous governments putting himself as an outsider in the public sphere (Al Jazeera, 2019).

However, Saied’s promises of political transformation and stability were challenged in his first months of power itself, with the inability to form a government, chose a prime minister and the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Ennahda the party with the single largest majority (20% of the vote) was not able to form a government in a parliament which constituted of eleven different parties and independent candidates. According to the constitution, the President had the onus to appoint the Prime Minister who would then have the responsibility to form the government. Elyes Fakhfakh, from the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties, a party and candidate who had not won a single seat in the assembly was chosen and eventually formed a fragile coalition in late February 2020 (Chiver, 2020). As this political turmoil seemed to subside, it was the pandemic which presented another challenge for the presidency and the new government to tackle.

The management of the pandemic was under the purview of Fakhfakh, who had been given executive power to rule by decree by the parliament under certain constraints. The prime minister’s handling of the pandemic itself received acclaim from civil society and think tanks for its containment of the virus in the first wave in 2020 (Abouzzohour, 2020; Serrano, 2020; Meddeb, 2020). However, in the second wave the pandemic exacerbated the economic crisis and parliamentary political turmoil remerged with the controversial resignation of

the Prime Minister Fakhfakh on allegations of corruption. Ennahda had sought to replace Fakhfakh through a vote of no confidence, which would have allowed them to form a government due to a majority in the parliament. Conversely, if Fakhfakh chose to resign, the constitution mandated that the president would be responsible for appointing the subsequent prime minister. A contentious debate emerged regarding the chronological order of events, specifically whether the no-confidence motion was initiated prior to the resignation. Ultimately, to mitigate further antagonism directed towards parliament from a hostile populace, Ennahda decided to acquiesce to Saied's authority once again. Consequently, President Saied exercised his influence by appointing Hichem Mechichi as the new prime minister. However, Mechichi started working closely with Ghannouchi, a move that backfired for Kais Saied, and sacked his loyalists including the Interior Minister appointed by him.

The economic impact of the pandemic was felt by the most vulnerable social groups of the economy (the border regions). Informal economic activity which had been 40% of the GDP and employed 32% of the workforce, declined by 60% (Meddeb, 2020; Dridi, 2020). Tourism industry contracted by 23% and manufacturing industry had been affected by international supply-chain issues and decreased demand from Europe (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2020). The main obstacle to the Tunisian economy came through 'dangerous levels' of public and external debt and the economy shrunk by 8.8% over the year 2020 (Figure 1) (World Bank, 2022). Meddeb argues that between 2011 and 2019, Tunisian authorities positioned themselves as providers of last resort in terms of employment, resulting in a notable expansion of the public sector. During 2011 and 2012, more than 90,000 individuals, primarily former contract workers, were integrated into the public sector, causing a twofold increase in the annual recruitment figures. As a result, the total number of employees in the sector (excluding publicly owned enterprises) reached 616,000. Concurrently, promotions and salary increments accompanied the hiring campaign, leading to

a growth in the public sector wage expenses from 11.8 per cent of the GDP in 2011 to 14 per cent of the GDP in 2019 consequently increasing public sector debt.

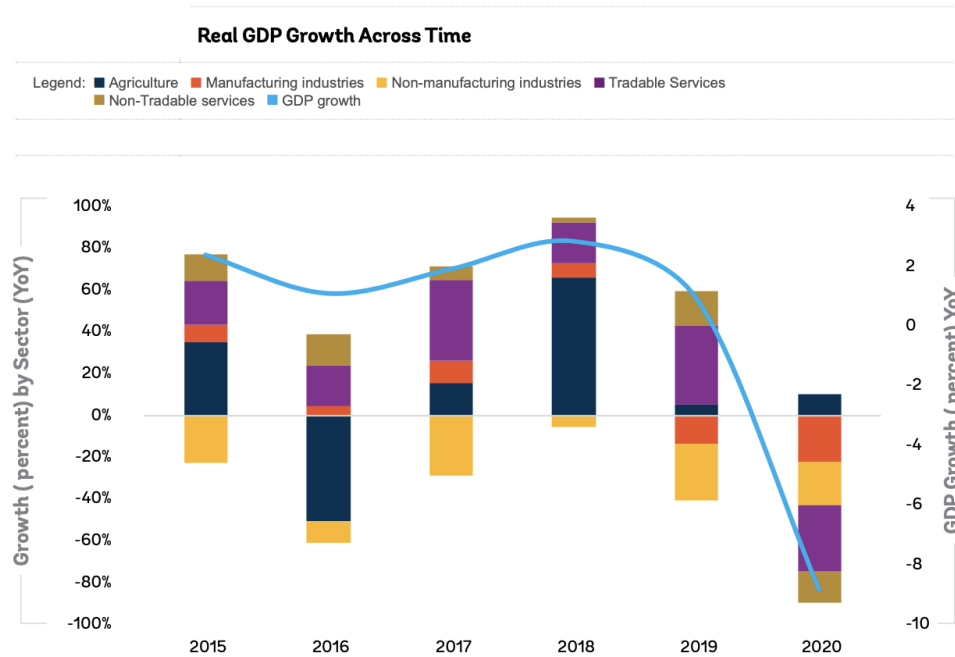


Figure 4.1: Real GDP Growth across 2015-2020 in Tunisia (Source: Systematic Country Diagnostic Report of Tunisia, World Bank, 2022 Page – 84)

In the months of November and December 2020, an extensive survey was conducted to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the private sector, encompassing 2,500 private firms. The results of these business pulse surveys underscored the profound shock experienced by these enterprises, with a significant proportion (21.6 percent) having succumbed to either temporary or permanent closures by the conclusion of the year. A substantial 65 percent of firms faced the looming threat of permanent closure within the subsequent 12-

month period. Conversely, a mere 30 percent of businesses expressed confidence in their capacity to endure until the forthcoming year.

The precipitous decline in demand emerged as a pivotal factor impacting businesses, as evidenced by over 80 percent of them experiencing a notable reduction in consumer demand. Consequently, this downturn in demand compelled numerous enterprises to resort to drastic measures, such as employee layoffs (26 percent) and wage cuts (15.7 percent). Prior to the pandemic, the unemployment rate had reached approximately 15 percent. However, during the pandemic year (2020), this situation deteriorated further, culminating in an alarming unemployment rate of 17.4 percent. Throughout the fourth quarter of the year, the ranks of the unemployed swelled by 78,000 individuals, and over the entire year, this figure surged by a staggering 133,000 (World Bank, 2022). This upswing in unemployment significantly contributed to the nationwide wave of protests that ensued during the pandemic period. Beyond the adverse consequences faced by businesses, self-employed workers also experienced a considerable decline in labour incomes, primarily attributing it to a notable dearth in customer demand. Because of the pandemic, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the European commission approved a combined 1.4 billion USD in pandemic assistance, however critics have argued that this was not sufficient for Tunisia to recover its economy, which had been already struggling prior to the pandemic (Meddeb, 2020). These funds include the MFA packages and IMF loans mentioned in the previous chapter. This thesis does not argue for EU assistance during the pandemic as directly influencing authoritarian rule, as this aid came as a part of the package of assistance for a range of partners and was provided in circumstances of emergency. However, continued aid without checks and balances does indirectly support the Saied regime in stabilising the economic woes to some extent.

#### 4.1.2 Suspension of Parliament and the Referendum: The Authoritarian Turn

President Saied had been a participant of the constitution-making process in 2013-14, however, former President Marzouki notes that most of his proposals reflected his actions when he became President were rejected by the Constitution drafting committee (Lawrence, 2022). He had proposed to create an hourglass shaped form of government, that would have a very, very strong presidential system, a lot of direct democracy, almost like Gadhafiesque kind of direct democracy at the bottom (Cordall, 2022). And there's almost no role for any intermediary, middleman institutions like political parties, civil society organisations, etc.

By early 2021, it was becoming increasingly apparent that Kais Saied would make moves, as he had been waiting for the 'right time' to do so (Al-Hachimi Al-Hamidi, 2021). In June 2021, over a dispute over the executive power over the country's external and internal security forces, Saied asked for the parliament and the nation to debate a new political system to end the deadlock between the parliament and the presidency (Al-Arabiya, 2021). During this time, the rift between the presidency grew, both the Presidency and the parliament were making public statements towards each other, Speaker of the Parliament and Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi in February 2021, publicly advocated Tunisia to absolve the presidency of executive power and be solely a parliamentary democracy. His comments came after the President refused to swear in ministers approved by the parliament to assume their duties (Al-Hachimi Al-Hamidi, 2021). However, Saied enjoyed more popular support than the parliament, his clean image and non-political background was perceived to be in line with the popular demand to remove corruption, which was targeted at the incompetence of Tunisian politicians in the parliament. Increasingly, popular protests adopted the slogans to dissolve the parliament. President Saied had made his ambitions to transform the political sphere of the Tunisia were already

expressed in his Presidential campaign, and his first year and a half in charge had created an environment for him to be able to do so as well.

His announcement as the head of the country's security forces drew first senses of criticism of 'self-coup' or 'authoritarian reflexes' (Abel, 2021), however his popular support remained high. Following these events, on July 25, 2021, a date of national significance, Kais Saied invoked Article 80 of the Tunisian constitution, suspended the parliament for a month with possible extension which eventually resulted in the dissolution of the parliament (Sadiki, 2021). There were signs of such a move in the making as Saied had advocated for radical political reforms in his election campaign, and following the political crisis, his statements of waiting for 'the right time' to make his moves and refusing to work in the power sharing structure engrained in the constitution. As a matter of fact, Saied's war against corruption and Tunisia's elite had just begun as he suspended the constitution in September and established 'self-supremacy' by issuing the Decree No 2021-117 to give him power to make executive decisions without oversight (The Guardian, 2021; European Parliament, 2021). In the same month, he appointed Nadjla Bouden Romdhane as prime minister, the first female prime minister in the Arab World, and a cabinet that was formed of Saied supporters in this interim government. He would then set out a two-year action plan and accomplish key goals of the plan in 2022. These moves were followed by a constitutional referendum a year later July, on 25, 2022, and a hugely boycotted and low voter turnout parliamentary elections in December 2022.

Demonstrations and protests were the foundation of the revolution in 2011, and ever since in the next decade, had become a continued feature of the Tunisian society. However, there was a sharp increase in protests and demonstrations since 2019 up until 2021 (Figure 4.2) (ACLED, 2023) which arguably



contributed to Saied's actions as he took advantage of the mistrust.<sup>7</sup> The repeated extension of the emergency measures imposed since 2015 and the reimposed strict Covid measures in the latter half of the year were one of the causes for the protests. However, the root causes for the sit-ins and protests over a large geographic region of the country was still economic, more than half the protests led by different labour groups over the course of 2021-23. Young people, lawyers, health workers were other prominent groups striking against the political elite in this time as well. The disparity in health resources is another form of discontent as poor economic situation also affected the health sector with the country's infrastructure only being able to support 240 Intensive Care beds (Impact International, 2020). Most of Tunisia's private health infrastructure had been concentrated in the coastal regions, and the public hospitals came under the purview of labour unions who were under strike leaving most of the hinterland with handicapped response during the pandemic (Otay, 2020).

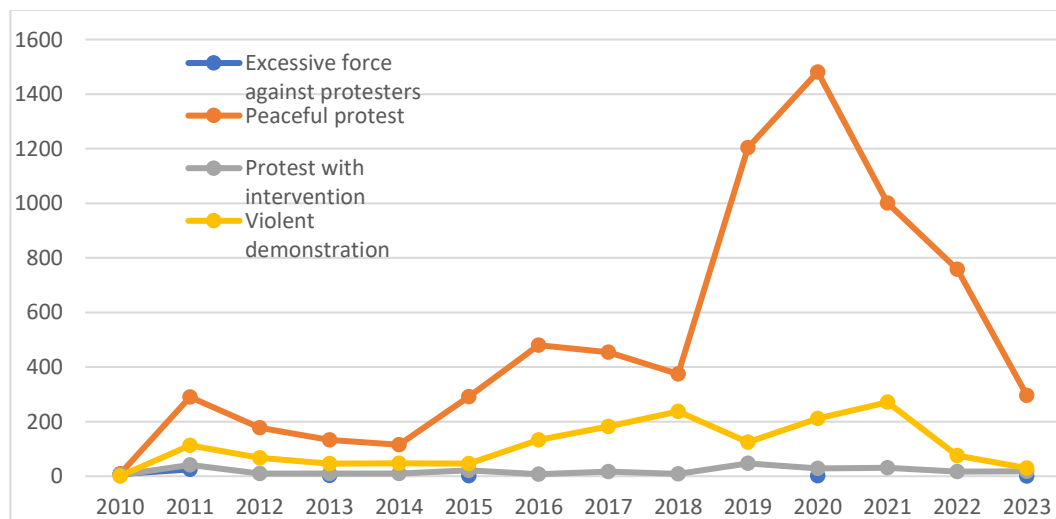


Figure 4.2: Number of Demonstrations in Tunisia (2010-2023) x-axis: Years; y-axis: No. of demonstrations ACLED Database, Accessed 21 July 2023

<sup>7</sup> Data for 2023 is incomplete as the database is constantly adding sources and reference points. Limitation to identify pro- and anti- Kais Saied protests.

### 4.1.3 The Signs of Authoritarianism

#### **i. Arrests of the Elite and dismantling the institutions**

Sadiki notes that the mammoth task of tackling corruption within Tunisia involved prosecutors, judges, established legal-political actors, parts of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), football clubs, countless prominent individuals, many members of the parliament were all at the centre of suspicion for Saied. Saied's supporters commended his moves, while on the other hand his opponents called his moves 'a self-coup' from within the presidency.

In the months that followed the real signs of concern began to emerge with the dismissal of the parliament that followed, arrests of political leaders and the judiciary. On 6<sup>th</sup> February 2022, Saied suspended the existing Supreme Judiciary council, an independent institution that oversaw the judicial proceedings of the country. However, much like his criticism of other democratic institutions (parliament), he accused the judiciary to be corrupt, accusing members of the council "of taking "billions" in bribes and delaying politically sensitive investigations, including into the assassinations of left-wing activists in 2013" (Al Jazeera, 2022). With a further decree a week later, he established another Supreme Judiciary council, in which he gave himself the powers to select, appoint, promote, and transfer of judges and the ability to act in certain circumstances as a disciplinary body in charge of removal (Al Jazeera, 2022). Furthermore, in June 2022, 57 judges were sacked with accusations of corruption and supporting terrorism. He accused the judges to be 'too close' to Ennahda and of stopping cases against the political party (Al Jazeera, 2022).

These crackdowns have virtually been directed towards all sections of Tunisian elite, and the institutions have been restructured. While Kais Saied has appointed a cabinet and formed an interim government under Najla Bouden

Romdhane, the parliament's powers are severely limited due to the President's rule by decree. Furthermore, the ministers do not have much political experience, they come from varied professional backgrounds, therefore do not hold much normative power over the prime minister or the people. It can be inferred that there has been a reshuffling of Tunisia's political elite and the crackdown against the pre- and post- revolution elite has allowed Saied to consolidate and restructure the centres of exercising power in the Tunisian institutions. Influential civil society groups like the UGTT who initially commended the actions of Saied in 2021 have also come under investigation which validates the theory of consolidation of power. Over the course of one year, Saied removed institutions that held accountability over his office. A brief list of the arrests and dismissals of the Tunisian politicians and government officials is included:

1. Dismissal of the parliament
2. One of Saied's first targets was Judge Bechir Akremi, who was placed under house arrest on July 31 on charges that he had hidden files pertaining to terrorism and the 2013 assassination of MP Chokri Belaid (Reuters, 2021).
3. More than 50 officials arrested by September 2021 (HRW, 2021).
4. Arrest of Chawki Tabib, the former director of the national anti-corruption authority, which was set up to investigate and fight corruption in 2011 (HRW, 2021).
5. Dismissal of the Supreme Judiciary council (DW, 2022)
6. Dismissals of 57 judges in February 2022 (DW, 2022)
7. Disappearance and remanding of former Justice Minister and Ennahda MP Nouredine Bhiri (Middle East Eye, 2022)
8. The conviction and sentencing in absentia of former President Moncef Marzouki (Reuters, 2021).

9. Two other parliament members have been detained for over one month on defamation charges: “Jdedi Sboui, arrested by authorities on August 5 based on complaints of defamation and corruption, and Faycel Tebini on August 2 under an October 2019 warrant for defamation, calumny, and inciting disobedience against the public prosecutor of the First Instance Court in Jendouba” (HRW, 2022).
10. Officers placed Zouheir Makhlof, an independent member of parliament, under house arrest while he was visiting his mother’s house on August 16, without giving him a reason. Makhlof told Human Rights Watch, “I was taken to the Maamoura police station, where an officer asked me to sign a document, but he would not let me read it.” (HRW, 2022)
11. Seventeen current or former Ennahdha members have been arrested since December 2022 (HRW, 2022).

## **ii. Popular support and low voter turnouts**

At this point, Tunisia had run through nine different governments in less than ten years of democratic rule. Arab Barometers survey data notes that at the time public mistrust in the government to be high as 82% of responders said that they did not feel the country was headed in the right direction (Arab Barometers, 2019). In 2021, 89% of the people said that they believed there was either large (70%) or medium (19%) levels of corruption in state institutions and agencies (Arab Barometer, 2021). And more than half believed that the state was not taking actions to address corruption (Figure 4.3). The perception of the levels of corruption which had reached an all-time high in 2018 (Figure 4.4), by 2021, it had reached back to its 2013 levels, however, the differences are not significant. Similarly, people voted more optimistically in their perception of government crackdown in 2018 than in 2021.

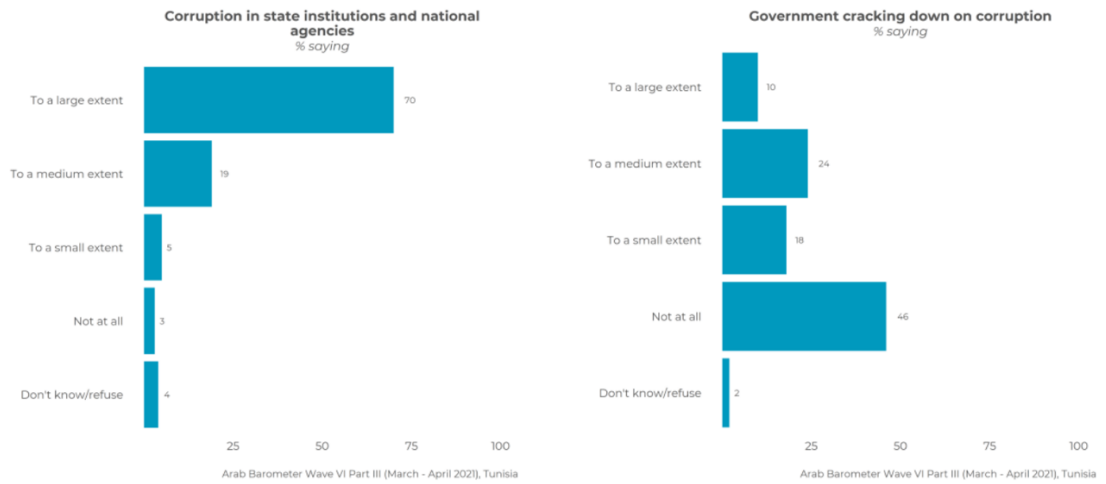


Figure 4.3: Perceptions of corruption and government crackdown in Tunisia in March-April 2021 Source: Tunisia country report, Arab Barometer VI

**To what extent do you think that there is corruption within the national state agencies and institutions in Tunisia?**  
 % saying to a large or medium extent.

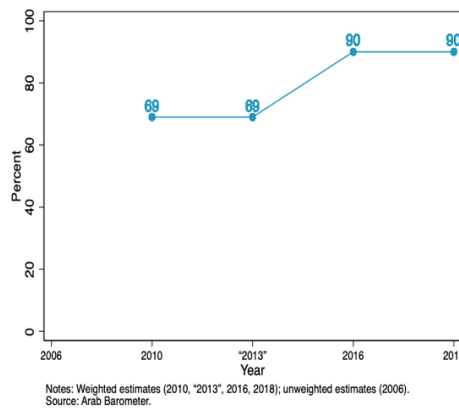


Figure 4.4: Perceptions of corruption in Tunisia from 2010-2018 Source: Tunisia country report, Arab Barometer V

Moreover, in 2022 Tunisian were more likely to answer that the government was doing more to tackle corruption (67% voted either with a ‘large’ or ‘medium’ extent). These numbers were like the post-revolution numbers but far less than the surveys in the decade in between, showing support for Saied’s attempts at fighting corruption (Arab Barometer, 2022).

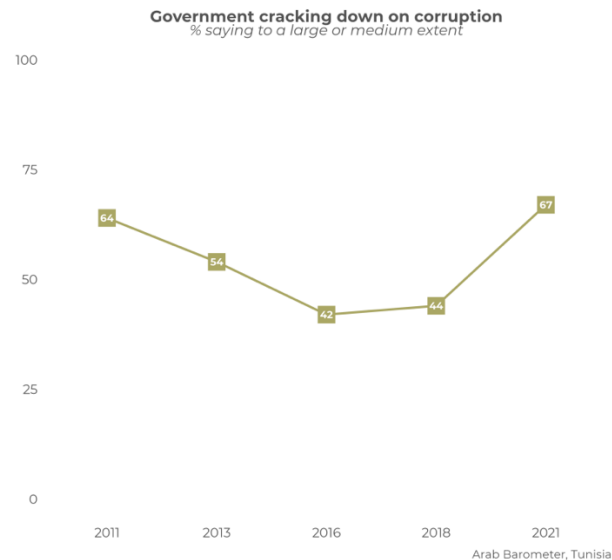


Figure 4.5: Perceptions of government tracking down corruption in Tunisia from 2011-2021 Source: Tunisia country report, Arab Barometer VII

The reactions in a country which saw political protests to make themselves heard, the reactions to these moves largely remained ‘low-key’ (The Guardian, 2021). Moreover, as reported many Tunisians celebrated this move as noted ‘tens of thousands of people flooded the streets of main cities to celebrate’ (Al Jazeera, 2021). In a survey conducted of a representative Tunisian population, Blackman and Nugent note that respondents said they agreed more with the sentence “The president’s actions hold corrupt politicians accountable and help ordinary Tunisians” than with the sentence “The president’s actions undermine [dimuqratiyya] and threaten the rights of the Tunisian people.”<sup>8</sup> Only 15%

<sup>8</sup> Ridge (2022) notes: The word used in the Arab Barometer and Blackman and Nugent questions is ‘dimuqratiyya’. Approximately half of MENA citizens construe ‘dimuqratiyya’ as a set of socio-economic outcomes, rather than a description of political processes (Tessler, Jamal, and Robbins 2012). This makes the term a poor translation from an analytical perspective. Questions using dimuqratiyya functionally overestimate democratic commitment (Ridge 2019).

indicated that his actions were a greater threat than they were a boon to the public (Blackman & Nugent 2022; Ridge, 2022). Furthermore, Arab Barometer Survey VII published in September 2022 concludes that Kais Saied was the most popular politician in Tunisia at the time, owing to his actions since July 25, 2021. The survey notes that the level of trust of the government doubled in since 2018 to 2021.

While these surveys pose a positive picture of the President's actions a peculiar paradox is also visible. Both the referendum for the amendment of the constitution and the parliamentary elections in December 2022- January 2023 witnessed historically low voter turnouts (30% and 11% respectively) (Volkman, 2022; DW, 2023; Le Monde, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). In both instances, Saied's favourable outcomes won the vote by more than 90%, signifying a clean sweep. This peculiarity supports Arab Barometers survey which stated, "Given the frustrations of the last decade, it appears many Tunisians are willing to support President Saied's efforts to enact dramatic change, even if it requires him to pursue legally questionable methods to do so" (Arab Barometer VII, 2022). Many Tunisians have responded that economy is weaker in a democracy and more than 79% responded that they prefer an effective government over the form it takes. Both numbers are one of the highest in the MENA region (Arab Barometer VII, 2022; BBC, 2022).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the mistrust of Tunisian population towards the existing governmental institutions and their performance has allowed Saied to resist the acts of 'activated citizenship' which has been a characteristic of Tunisian civil society. Traditional civil society groups (UGTT) along with the political parties have increased their criticisms of the Saied regime, however, the public perceptions remain optimistic. Through Arab Barometers survey it can be seen that he has large support base. Nevertheless, despite sufficient support in surveys over a two-year period, low voter turnouts in Saied initiated

elections is a cause for concern. In the next section, let us observe how EU discourse towards Tunisia has shifted in these two years.

## 4.2 Western confusion?

The election of Kais Saied and up until the suspension of parliament was not much of a change from discourse as Tunisia the domestic discourse had largely been the same with the new parliament however, the crisis did seem to worsen. EU president Charles Michel had made an official visit to the country in early 2021, asked Tunisians to uphold its choice of a pluralistic democratic society and EU wanted to play an active role in promoting democratic ideals in its neighbourhood (EU Council, 2021). There was infighting within the parliament and the political protests continued. With the onset of the pandemic, Tunisia's initial response was praised however the situation worsened with the second wave of the pandemic. Furthermore, with the suspension of the parliament on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2021, the image of Kais Saied that was started to be challenged. In the previous section on the western contribution towards Tunisian democratic transition the key features that were identified were the conditionality that EU presents for its continued economic support. EU had over the past decade mildly changed its discourse towards democracy beginning with the idea of deep democracy which would soon be discarded and then adopting similar responses of the pre-revolution times. However, EU assessment reports noted the events questioning democratic gains like Youssef Chahed's unlawful arrests of his political opponents. On the other hand, EU had continued its financial support through instruments such as MFA and had been Tunisia's important partner in its loan negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank.

Document/Statement	Date	Institution
Tunisia: statement by the High Representative, on behalf of the European Union	July 27, 2021	HR/VP of the EU Council,



		European Commission
Call for dialogue with President Saïed and Speaker Ghannouchi	July 27, 2021	European Parliament
EU HR Borrell visits Tunisia	September 10, 2021	HR/VP of the EU Council, European Commission
Tunisia: High Representative/ Vice-President Josep Borrell speaks with President Kaïs Saïed	October 15, 2021	HR/VP of the EU Council, European Commission
JOINT MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on the situation in Tunisia ( <a href="#">2021/2903(RSP)</a> )	October 20, 2021	EU Parliament
Tunisia: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union	<a href="#">December 16, 2021</a>	HR/VP of the EU Council, European Commission
DECISION No 1/2021 OF THE EU-TUNISIA ASSOCIATION COUNCIL of 24 November 2021 agreeing on the extension of the validity of the EU-Tunisia strategic priorities [2021/2212]	November 24, 2021	Council of the EU
Tunisia: Political situation ahead of the constitutional referendum – At a Glance	March, 2022	EU Parliament Think Tank (Stanicek Branislav)
Tunisia: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the constitutional referendum	<a href="#">July 27, 2022</a>	HR/VP of the EU Council, European Commission
Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the press conference	March 20, 2023	HR/VP of the EU Council, European Commission

Table 4.1: List of official EU documents mentioning Tunisia since the dismissal of the Mechichi government<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.2.1 EU Response

Following the dismissal of the parliament, on July 27, 2021, HR/VP Borell released a statement where he said, “country's democratic roots, respect for the rule of law, the Constitution and the legislative framework must be preserved while remaining attentive to the wishes and aspirations of the Tunisian people” (European Council, 2021). The brief statement reaffirmed EU’s ‘priorities’ to uphold democratic order, however, there was little pressure on the presidency’ actions.

Former prime minister of Italy and former president of the European Commission Romano Prodi condemned the west for their lack of response on the situation in Tunisia, however a new narrative emerged with his remarks. He noted that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and UAE had supported Kais Saied’s actions towards a presidential system whereas Qatar and Turkey were more favourable to the democratic model promoted by their allies ‘Muslim Brotherhood’ which made up Tunisia’s democratic path (Middle East Monitor, 2021). Firstly, it is important to note that referring to Muslim brotherhood’s democratic path with Ennahda is controversial point of contention and suspicion towards the movement, an idea that the movement and its leaders have long rejected. Secondly and more importantly, this statement signifies a narrative shift, which puts Tunisia into its regional power flux and hegemonic alliances, the two groups- Saudi, UAE and Egypt against Turkey and Qatar. He said that EU should not see it as an internal issue, rather an issue of security amid fears of mass migrations and poor migration control in Tunisia. His statements were an

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<sup>9</sup> This list includes major statements and documents from the three EU institutions in the upper echelons of the hierarchy, however there are other documents that have been included in the analysis and the bibliography.

initial foresight to European discourse towards Tunisia that was to follow. Another, important element of this discourse was the much-anticipated IMF bailout that Tunisia had been negotiating to offset its public debt, and fears of defaulting on previous loans were rising. Ennahda leader and former youth and sports minister Ahmed Galoul requested EU to act in an interview in September 2021 (Fox, 2021). He pleaded that Saied was against the IMF bailout for Tunisia and according to the conditions of the loan agreement, it needed to be negotiated through the parliament. The parliament was also needed to pass and implement a budget for the fiscal year 2021-22. Moreover,

EU's first official response was followed with HR/VP Borell's visit to Tunis in September 2021, where he reaffirmed European Union and its member states' commitment towards partnership with Tunisia. His statements did not exert any pressure on the presidency, instead reaffirmed EU's partnership with Tunisia. Following the appointment of the new parliament, EU parliament followed with a discussion and a resolution towards Tunisia (2021/2903(RSP)). This document noted the EU's past relationship, its partnerships and its financial assistance to Tunisia. It noted its concerns against the President's violations and manipulation of the country's political elite, civil society and institutions (European parliament, 2021). The document notes the concerns expressed by different critics of the Kais Saied and devotes a large portion of the document on the domestic situation in Tunisia. However, it also notes that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and UAE have supported Kais Saied's actions and it also reaffirms its own domestic concerns of illegal migrations through its border. While it falls short of issuing pressuring conditions on the President and remains a normative document. The document also 'calls on the Commission and European External Action Service (EEAS) to step up their dialogue with the Tunisian authorities, economic entities and Tunisian civil society.....in order to make progress with the necessary structural reforms needed to obtain an IMF bailout loan' (European Parliament, 2021). On October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, HR/VP Borell also

mentioned developments in Tunisia in his press conference, where he presented EU's positions in its different spheres of influence. This statement acknowledged the limitation of powers of the new government under Nadjla Bouden Romdhane and the first public statement where the EU representative states that he reaffirmed his concerns directly to President Kais Saied.

Interestingly, in a French TV interview in February 2022 Vice President Borell for the first time mentioned that EU could suspend its Macro Financial Assistance loans if the situation in Tunisia does not improve. He said that these actions depended on how the situation would evolve in the country with the impending referendum, however he affirmed this would not be an economic sanction but a suspension of the loans (Borell on TV5, 2022).<sup>10</sup>

From when the referendum was announced in 2021, EU continued the narrative of respecting Tunisia's own discourse and not criticising Saied, while maintaining its support for the Tunisian institutional process and reaffirming its concerns. Following the referendum, a statement from the office of HR/VP, it noted the low voter turnout and reaffirmed the narrative of the need for Tunisia to have an inclusive dialogue. On the recommendations of the Venice Commission, it advocated that the reforms need to include 'broad consensus among the various political forces, including political parties and civil society' (EU Council, 2022; Venice Commission, 2022). EU did not send an observation mission for the parliamentary elections held in December 2022 – January 2023 and did not make any statements on the elections either. It is important to reiterate that these elections observed a very low voter turnout (around 11% in both rounds) and Nadjla Bouden Romdhane, the leader of the pro Kais Saied the 25<sup>th</sup> of July movement swept the elections (DW, 2023; Le Monde, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023).

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<sup>10</sup> Translated from French using Google Translate from an interview in French TV5 channel.

#### 4.2.2 The discourse in 2023 – Migration, IMF and a new comprehensive partnership.

After the elections the Tunisia-EU relationship took a different turn, the narratives have focused more on migration through into Europe through Tunisia. European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders (Frontex) reported on January 13 of 2023 that illegal migration through its Southern Mediterranean route had been the highest in 2022 since 2017. Egyptians, Bangladeshis and Tunisians were the three top nationalities of people who crossed borders into Europe through this route. In March 2023, EU HR/VP Josep Borrell's press statement, EU's more critical yet, conveyed an inward narrative that EU needs to continue monitoring a 'very very dangerous' situation. He said,

*“It is imperative to avoid the economic and social collapse and to support [the] Tunisian people. We cannot turn a blind eye to what is happening there.*

*Rule of law, respect for human rights and key, important structural reforms on one side, and on the other side, the finalisation of the programme already agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), that has to be signed by the Tunisian President [Kais Saïed], this is indispensable.” (EU Council, 2023)*

It is important to note here that the issue of illegal migration into EU has been one of EU's primary conditions in its 'conditionality' clauses for funding through grants or loans and had been active concern (Uzlaşik, 2022). Although, it was now that migration had become the central narrative of Borrell's official narrative towards Tunisia, the statement clearly says,

*“If Tunisia collapses economically or socially, then we will be in a situation where new flows of migrants will come to Europe. We have to avoid this situation.”* (EU Council, 2023)

Furthermore, European Parliament passed its most critical resolution towards Tunisia in the similar week. The text of the resolution used terminology European Parliament had not used before for the Kais Saied mentioning “President Saied’s authoritarian drift” and “Saied has been ruling alone” since July 25, 2021 (EU Parliament, 2023). The resolution is strict in its language and within the domains of the powers of the EU parliament, it made a statement. While in its title it confines its criticism to “recent attacks in Tunisia against freedom of expression and association”, the text expands its criticism on migrant control and persecution of sub-Saharan migrants within Tunisia, the President’s ‘racist remarks’, the attacks and persecution of the opposition and the civil society.

However, Kais Saied condemned the statements made by Borrell, distancing himself with EU’s narrative and refusing ‘foreign diktats’. Saied said, "It is necessary for Tunisians to rely on their own capabilities to overcome the difficulties." He added that "Tunisia rejects any dictations of solutions from abroad," commenting, "It is us who [are entitled to] devise solutions" (Al Mayadeen English, 2023). Furthermore, Saied rejected the hugely anticipated and agreed IMF bailout package worth more than 1.8 billion US dollars, citing the same reason (Clare Brown, 2023; Pavia, 2023). Critics have argued that indeed, bailouts have not helped Tunisia to counter its economic problems and restructuring production capabilities, tax frameworks etc might be more beneficial (Pavia, 2023). However, another perspective to the rejection is also the harsher conditions that IMF bailout came with, which were not favourable for Saied, hence rejecting the deal. Essentially, this rejection of IMF bailout had consequences, firstly, it strengthened Saied’s image as a strong leader, not bound

by international pressures. The image he had created at home, now he was projecting it abroad. Secondly, it created pressure on EU and its southern member states, who now feared an economic collapse, and consequent increase of illegal migration.

Through its official statements, EU had changed its narrative towards Saied and consequentially towards Tunisia as it sees the consolidation of a new dictator's rule who would not shy away from going against it. However, Tunisia is an important partner for the EU and security in Tunisia is important for EU security interests, be it economic or security against migrant inflow. However, the European institutions had not adopted such resolutions and statements against Tunisia in the past years. Understandably, the steps taken by Kais Saied have been the most undemocratic in nature after the ben Ali era. While EU discourse has become gradually and increasingly become critical of Kais Saied's regime, Kais Saied's time at presidency has also been the time where EU aid and partnership has been the highest. EU and Tunisia have established multiple agreements and partnerships in 2023 with huge bailout packages while also continuing its MFA assistance in the 2021 and 2022 packages agreed before (European Commission, 2022). In June 2023, EU and Tunisia have agreed to work together on a comprehensive partnership package for (DG NEAR, 2023):

- Strengthening economic and trade ties
- A sustainable and competitive energy partnership
- Migration
- People-to-people contacts

In the media however, the EU leaders have called it a deal which is a direct exchange of money for string border control. EU President Von der Leyen said in June 2023, that the EU was willing to disburse 900 million Eur in Micro Financial Assistance (MFA) and up to 150 milion Eur directly in budget support. President Von der Leyen, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Italian Prime

Minister Georgia Meloni visited Tunisia in June 2023, to meet President Saied to agree on the deal. This deal comes after several criticisms of Tunisian president and growing concerns of illegal migration in the EU. Saied's rejection of the IMF bailout and promptly making a deal with EU, which primarily focuses on Tunisia tightening its border control can be conceived as a signal of EU's weak conditionality.

The path that EU has chosen signifies two things. It reaffirms the claim that this thesis has made thus far, EU prioritises its own security interests in its relationship with Tunisia. Therefore, EU has continued its financial assistance despite Tunisia's authoritarian slide and has helped Tunisia in negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank as well, security in Tunisia is important for security within Europe. Secondly, in securing its own interests, EU's continued support to Tunisia despite Kais Saied's disregard to 'EU interference', wanting to move away from the 'donor-recipient logic', non-conforming to conditionality in this agreement signifies an acceptance of the Saied's status quo in Tunisia. With continued support Kais Saied is able leverage the economic breakdown and EU has had to secure its interests to maintain stability on the Tunisian borders.



## 5. Analysis and Conclusion- Comparison of EU relations with a parliamentary republic (2011-2021) with EU relations with an autocrat (2021-present)

Finally, this section would combine the previous chapters to outline key takeaways and answer the research question, **“How does the discourse created by the EU towards Tunisia since the Arab Spring played a role in Kais Saied consolidating executive power over the Tunisia’s institutions?”**

This question would be answered through connecting Tunisia’s domestic discourse to the theoretical underpinnings from the literature review and then transposing EU’s discourse through theory as well.

### 5.1 Authoritarian Turn in Tunisia

Firstly, Tunisia experienced an upwards trajectory in democratic transitions between 2011-14. However, with the first parliamentary elections the progress stagnated as political infighting and instability of the governments brought further issues to the fore. By 2018, Tunisia had reached an all-time high in the number of protests and demonstrations in the post revolution era signifying that public discontent on the socio-economic circumstances of the country was rising. This signifies that the concept of ‘activated citizenship’ which was able to catalyse regime change in 2011 had become a feature of the Tunisian society. However, it can also be inferred the continuous acts of activated citizenship through protests and demonstrations became ineffective, validating the theory that civil society can catalyse regime change however it is the elite who hold the power to consolidate democratic gains. As for the elites, we see a strong resistance towards Ben Ali proponents in the political sphere, however, the secular conservative ideologies remained an active voice. The rise and fall of Nidaa Touness and its alliance’s favourability towards Ben Ali style social norm conformation with the Europe but not institutional norm transfer is an example

of the fact. As for institutions, Tunisian civil society and international observation missions were instrumental in facilitating the National Dialogue and subsequent elections, which proved essential for the new Tunisian institutions to be established. However, weak elite relations and perceived corruption rendered the institutions weak and vulnerable to power consolidation attempts as early as Youssef Chahed's use of extra-constitutional powers to arrest political opponents with corruption allegations. As for the EU discourse, Chahed's actions found two sentences in EU assessments reports for fulfilment of conditionality provisions. With the dismissal of parliament in July 2021 and the discourse of power consolidation that followed, Tunisia's democratic learning was contested. Kais Saied had managed to overthrow government institutions, establish new institutions under his executive power, all while maintaining considerable public support. As Brownlee (2007) had argued institutionalisation of critical democratic values like political tolerance comes through democratic learning. While this instance is not sufficient to prove his argument, it certainly adds weight to his proposition. Curiously, low voter turnouts in the referendum of 2022 and the latest parliamentary elections, did not change much of the popular support for the President. However, in 2023 his racist remarks, and certain actions have come under contention, his hard stance on IMF bailout schemes and reshuffling priorities with EU has acted in his favour. Saied seems to have adopted the authoritarian playbook and advanced on Heydemann's (2007) 'upgraded authoritarianism', where he has used populist rhetoric, using the grievances of the population to attain power. And once in power, he has shrunk the elite circles within the institutions to his allies, leaving no room for opposition. Furthermore, he has shown strength to the international community, making public statements against 'foreign diktats' while still managing to receive high levels of financial aid to aggravate Tunisia's economy. Through his discourse, he has said to the Tunisians that he is not a western puppet like earlier dictators, and he has forced his western partners to offer him loans/funds with lesser conditionality if he fulfils their security

interests. Him rejecting a larger but stricter offer from IMF, and accepting comprehensive partnership with EU with less sum, but on the rhetoric of only migration feeds into his preferences.

## 5.2 EU discourse in Tunisia

This thesis puts EU's targeted democracy promotion efforts at the centre stage and observed that official efforts of Tunisia have not been conducive to prosperity of democracy. While Election observation missions and European Parliament think tank reports have been critical of democratic trends in Tunisia ever since the revolution, EU's critique had remained largely similar of the pre-revolution times.

The key elements of EU discourse identified have been the initial narrative and subsequent absence of 'deep democracy' and the persistence of loose forms of positive conditionality. With the parallel domestic discourse, it can be inferred that the two most powerful and popular groups in Tunisian political landscape, the Islamists and the secular conservatives are not inclined towards adopting EU social and civil norms owing their own preferences. As for the institutional norms, Islamists and progressives show a democratic character but the rise of social conservatives in the parliament and the presidency (from which Ennahda didn't contest until 2019) has arguably resisted the institutional reforms. This is evident with the impunity provided by the legislation of 2017 to civil servants facing charges of corruption on the cases before 2011. Youssef Chahed's partial war on corruption against only the beneficiaries of the post-revolution order and not over the 'old elite' is another example of the fact.

For economic reforms, Islamists are the only group who support economic liberalisation while the secular conservatives have their own form conditionality based on their benefits. Therefore, if we compare the preferences of Tunisian

discourse with the EU discourse, we can see that the popular groups have weak preferences towards implementing social and institutional reforms and complying with EU conditionality in these domains. However, economic conditionality conditions are more likely to be met as long it is beneficial for the groups. Islamists are pro-reform but for secular conservatives and their multiple influential parties, EU's lenient approach and increasing MFA funding provides legitimacy and a reminiscence of the previous political order without possible consequences. Therefore, the economic conditionality has been met without proper social and institutional norm diffusion.

Essentially, EU has not shifted its discourse after the revolution. The brief advocacy of the concept of 'deep democracy' and its absence thereafter. The focus of EU conditionality became economic reforms with assessment reports acknowledging authoritarian reflexes but not taking actions on it. EU favourability in complying with the Tunisian regimes over the past decades allowed EU and the Tunisian regimes to fulfil their interests, while EU can favourably have Tunisia impose security measures for migration and secure their own interests, the regime received legitimacy and a constant flow of funds to implement the measures that align with the EU. While Tunisia made democratic strides in the decade after the revolutions, as exemplified the remnants of the previous order had slowly crept in to dissuade the democratic gains. This thesis argues that EU policy after the Arab Spring did not capitalise on the opportunity to consolidate democracy, human rights and rule of law rather exhibited a 'more of the same' or 'old wine in new bottles' approach (Colombo & Tocci, 2012). However, the events in Tunisia since 2020, with Kais Saied's consolidation of power presented EU another opportunity to actively engage with the norms it promotes discursively.

Since 2021, EU has become much harsher in its criticism of a sharp authoritarian turn, it has gradually adopted a tonal shift, using words such as 'self-coup' in its

statements and threats of ‘suspending the sanction’. However, these warnings have not been put in practice. It has been mentioned that financial assistance through EU has not decreased in Saied’s regime. This approach can be explained with the claim that this thesis makes, that EU prefers security and stability over democracy in its southern partner states. If we look closely, the instances where Kais Saied’s regime has received economic support from the EU, there are EU interests at the heart of the deals. The MFA disbursements of 2020, 2021 and 2022 were a part of the COVID relief package. The pandemic was a global security issue which affected most economies and therefore, also Tunisia’s economy. However, a collapse of Tunisia’s economy is also a threat to Europe as it would drive migration towards Europe and increase instability towards its southern borders. Secondly, the comprehensive partnership package has directly been advertised as a ‘cash’ for migration control deal. The visits of EU President Von der Leyen, Dutch Prime Minister Rutte and Italian Prime Minister Meloni to Tunisia to sign the deal is another form of normative power projection on behalf of Saied who stand to gain the most from the deal. This deal strengthens EU’s cooperation with Tunisia however on Kais Saied’s terms, legitimising his position in his own country. Lastly, EU needs Tunisia to be an ally from a strategic sense, due to its proximity to its borders. If EU and Tunisia relationship was to be affected, Tunisia would still need economic and financial support to solve its economic issues. It could open opportunities for EU’s geostrategic competitors like Russia and China to sweep in and partner with Tunisia.

Therefore, this thesis concludes that EU democracy promotion in Tunisia has only been on a normative level, whereas EU investment in Tunisia is conditioned towards EU’s security interests. EU needs stability in Tunisia to secure its own borders, therefore it has only mildly criticised the Tunisian regimes, while continuing aid packages on a periodic basis. Over the past decade EU has supported most regimes in Tunisia, while it has been most vocal to Kais Saied, EU’s diplomatic actions have provided legitimacy to his rule through increased partnerships. Moreover, EU has avoided commenting on calls of

Tunisian opposition leaders to comment on their suppression highlighting EU's support to Saied, or lack of support to the opposition, both negatively affecting democracy in Tunisia.

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