

Thesis Title: Investigating international factors aiding an authoritarian turn - The case of Tunisia.

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the role of the European Union's discourse towards Tunisia since the Arab Spring in contributing to the consolidation of executive power by President Kais Saied over the country's institutions. It connects Tunisia's domestic discourse to theoretical underpinnings from the literature review and transposes the EU's discourse through theory as well. The study first analyzes Tunisia's trajectory in democratic transitions between 2011 and 2014, which initially showed progress but later faced political infighting and instability leading to public discontent. The rise of activated citizenship as a catalyst for regime change is acknowledged, but it becomes ineffective in affecting democratic gains, confirming the significance of elite power. Weak elite relations and perceived corruption render Tunisian institutions vulnerable to power consolidation attempts.

Regarding the EU's discourse, it is observed that the EU's targeted democracy promotion efforts did not foster democracy's prosperity in Tunisia. The EU's key elements of discourse focus on economic reforms, but social and institutional reforms receive weak support from powerful political groups, including Islamists and secular conservatives. Economic conditionality is more likely to be met, while social and institutional norm diffusion is lacking. Despite the Arab Spring, the EU's discourse remains largely unchanged, with a preference for security and stability over democracy in its southern partner states.

The study then explores how President Kais Saied consolidated power through populist rhetoric, limiting opposition within institutions, and asserting strength to the international community. The EU's response to Saied's authoritarian turn has been more critical since 2021, but financial assistance to Tunisia has continued due to EU's interests in maintaining stability and countering migration. The thesis concludes that the EU's democracy promotion in Tunisia has been predominantly normative, while its investments are conditioned by security interests. The EU's diplomatic actions have inadvertently provided legitimacy to Saied's rule through increased partnerships, affecting democracy in Tunisia. Additionally, the EU's avoidance of commenting on the suppression of Tunisian opposition leaders further impacts democracy in the country.