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An Electoral Year Marked by Repression and Tension

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Since Tunisian President Kais Saied's coup de force of 25 July 2021, which allowed him to assume all powers, repression and attacks on freedoms have become widespread in an increasingly bleak economic and social climate. The systematic dismantling of the rule of law and checks and balances has been accompanied by a series of arrests targeting opposition figures, journalists, community activists, businessmen and others. The charges brought against them range from "plotting against the state" to "spreading fake news" and "money laundering."

Meanwhile, economic and social conditions continue to deteriorate, particularly due to the decrease in purchasing power, which is affecting the most vulnerable. Moreover, the population of sub-Saharan migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Tunisia continues to grow amid a climate of tension with local populations and police repression.

It is against this backdrop that the presidential elections took place, an event that was to mark the year 2024. They were held in a poisonous climate, characterized by the closure of all areas of freedom, including the media, and by an alarming regression in democracy.

A Return to Trompe-l'oeil Elections¹

Since the start of the political transition on 14 January 2011, electoral contests had been dominated by stimulating competition between candidates. The multiplicity and diversity of candidacies (26 candidates in the 2019 presidential elections) aroused voter interest, fuelled contradictory debates, crystallized opposition and propelled the media and social networks to relay and amplify the candidates' statements.

During the October 2024 presidential election campaign, with an omnipotent executive, the political context had deteriorated considerably and the conditions no longer allowed for free and transparent competition. The October 2024 presidential elections bore no resemblance to the elections that followed the 2011 political transition. They were a return to the authoritarian practices and reflexes of the pre-2011 governments. They pitted the incumbent President against a rival in prison² and another who had long supported him.

Unsurprisingly, Kais Saied won the first round by a wide margin (90.69% of the vote, with a turnout of 28.8%). And the reason: the credibility of the Electoral Commission (ISIE) had been tarnished since its members were appointed by the President of the Republic rather than elected by Parliament. The activities of the audiovisual regulatory authority (HAICA) had come to a standstill due to the control

¹ CHOUIKHA, Larbi. "13 Years After the 'Revolution': Media and Tunisia's 2024 Presidential Elections." Arab Reform Initiative, February 2025. Available at: www.arab-reform.net/publication/13-years-after-the-revolution-media-and-tunisias-2024-presidential-elections/.

² In addition to the incumbent, there were two other candidates, one of whom is serving a lengthy prison sentence for charges relating to "falsified endorsements," but who nevertheless remained in the running for the election.

exercised over it by the government. The Electoral Commission refused to implement the Administrative Court's decision to reinstate three candidates it had previously excluded. And, ten days before the ballot (27/09/24), Parliament approved an "urgent" amendment to Organic Law No. 2014-16 of 26 May 2014 that removed the Administrative Court's prerogative to arbitrate electoral disputes and decided to transfer the powers of administrative and financial jurisdiction to the judiciary, seen more favourably by the executive. The principal NGOs that used to monitor the smooth running of elections did not receive accreditation from the ISIE, because their sources of funding were deemed "suspect." And for the first time since 2011, European Union observers were not allowed to monitor the elections.

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As a result, the 2024 presidential election was a non-event for almost all Tunisians. The turnout for this election (28.8% of voters) was the lowest registered since 2011. Moreover, the campaign generated little or no interest among voters, in contrast to 2019, when the media displayed great freedom of tone and movement. In 2024, there were no adversarial debates between the candidates, and little or no news or coverage of citizens' opposing reactions. In general, the media gave pride of place to the incumbent candidate, with the exception of certain radio programmes or newspaper articles aiming to voice divergent opinions.

This is because, since 2022, freedom of expression and information, as well as the right to information have been seriously undermined. Unconstitutional legal provisions that weigh heavily on the work of journalists and on the dissemination of opinions via

social networks (Decree-Law 54 on cybercrime) have tended to restrict areas of expression and information. This decree provides for severe prison sentences for spreading "fake news" and "rumours" online and, de facto, in the media. In the same vein, during 2023, opponents of various political affiliations, activists, lawyers and judges were being charged with "plotting against state security" under a 2015 anti-terrorism law that sets out restrictions on freedoms in general and opens the door to all sorts of abuses, including casting political opponents as "terrorists."

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Difficult Living Conditions and Tension with Sub-Saharan Migrants

In socioeconomic terms, 2024 was a trying year for Tunisians. Already weakened by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Tunisian economy was severely hit by the repercussions of the war in Ukraine, due to its heavy dependence on cereal and hydrocarbon imports. The inflation rate in Tunisia reached 7% for the year 2024, seriously affecting the purchasing power of Tunisians. Rising prices for basic foodstuffs, consumer goods and fuel hit the most vulnerable families particularly hard. The growth rate remained low, at 1.4%. Moreover, Tunisia faces a heavy debt burden (approximately 80% of its Gross Domestic Product – GDP), which continues to grow as a result of increased international borrowing to cover the budget deficit.

At the same time, financial remittances from Tunisians abroad are a breath of fresh air for the Tunisian economy. They accounted for 7.7% of the GDP in 2024. The same is true of tourism revenues, which increased by 8.3% compared to 2023. According to experts, remittances from Tunisians abroad and tourism revenues have thus contributed to covering the country's external debt service for 2024.³

³ "Les transferts des Tunisiens résidents à l'étranger en hausse de 4,6%." *Tustex*, 23 December 2024. Available at: www.tustex.com/economie-actualites-economiques/les-transferts-des-tunisiens-residents-a-l-etranger-en-hausse-de-46.

However, unemployment remains an endemic scourge of the Tunisian economy. In 2024, it affected 16% of the working population (13.3% for men and 22.1% for women). Unemployment is particularly high among young people, especially university graduates, for whom it rose to 25%, up from the previous year's 23%. The country's inland regions have also been hard hit. Faced with a lack of attractive career prospects and unfavourable economic conditions, some young graduates seek opportunities abroad. Successive governments have struggled to retain this young talent.

The EU commits to providing Tunisia with a funding programme of up to €1 billion, including €105 million to “combat illegal immigration”

The medium-term economic outlook could deteriorate due to a high risk of debt overhang limiting access to external financing, social tension caused by the high cost of living and persistently high interest rates in developed economies.⁴ Against this backdrop, social unrest is on the rise as a result of growing unease. In May 2024, 248 social movements were recorded, an increase of about 21% over April, when there were 195 protests. This made May the busiest month for protests since the beginning of the year. Demands ranged from challenging a court ruling to defending workers' rights and improving working conditions, as well as the right to employment...⁵

In addition to economic and social problems, there are also tensions caused by the presence of thou-

sands of irregular sub-Saharan migrants. These migrants survive in unsanitary makeshift camps in areas bordering the Mediterranean, waiting for the chance to clandestinely board a dinghy for Europe. Their numbers in Tunisia are estimated at between 20,000 and 25,000, according to NGO figures.⁶ Sometimes violent clashes, fuelled by xenophobic and racist rhetoric from the country's leaders,⁷ pit these migrants against local residents. And the Tunisian associations that come to their aid are prosecuted and condemned.

In fact, the crisis caused by the presence of thousands of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia stems both from the consequences of the “Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership between the European Union and Tunisia”⁸ and from the absence of a national policy to manage this issue, apart from the use of security methods.

In 2024, the number of migrants arriving in Italy by sea, particularly from the Tunisian coast, fell by 58% compared to 2023. The reason for this drop is the agreement signed on 16 July 2023 between the European Union and Tunisia. Under this agreement, the EU commits to providing Tunisia with a funding programme of up to €1 billion, including €105 million to “combat illegal immigration,” which will be allocated to “border management [...], search and rescue operations, the fight against smuggling, and repatriation.” Thanks to technical and financial assistance from the European Union, the number of interceptions at sea by Tunisian border guards and the intensification of the fight against smuggling networks have significantly reduced the number of illegal migrants heading for Europe.

However, the terms of this agreement have been criticized by a number of humanitarian organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, which consid-

⁴ “Rapport de la Banque africaine de développement (BAD) sur les perspectives économiques de la Tunisie 2024-2025.” www.afdb.org/fr/pays-afrique-du-nord-tunisie/perspectives-economiques-en-tunisie.

⁵ TUNISIAN SOCIAL OBSERVATORY: *Monthly Report – May 2024*. Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économiques et Sociaux. Available at: https://ftdes.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/OST-MAI-EN-_merged.pdf.

⁶ “Tunisie: le président Kaïs Saïed veut intensifier les retours ‘volontaires’ de migrants.” *InfoMigrants*, 26 March 2025. Available at: <https://mc.informations.net/tunisie-le-president-kais-saied-veut-intensifier-les-retours-volontaires-de>.

⁷ In a speech on 21 February 2023, President Saïd linked undocumented African migrants to crime and a “plot” to change the country's demographic composition. Cited in: *La Tunisie. Le discours raciste du président déclenche une vague de violence contre les Africains-es Noirs*, 10 March 2023. Available at: www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/.

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/pt/ip_23_3887.

ers that: “This agreement contained neither serious human rights safeguards for migrants and asylum seekers, nor provisions to prevent European aid from going to entities responsible for human rights violations. It was signed at a time when hundreds of black African migrants were wasting away in the desert along the Tunisian borders, after the security forces had summarily rounded them up and abandoned them there.”⁹

Because of the difficulties in improving the socioeconomic situation, President Kais Saïed is multiplying his conspiracy theories

Over the course of 2024, 7,250 sub-Saharan migrants living in Tunisia returned “voluntarily” to their country via the International Organization for Migration (IOM).¹⁰ The term “voluntary return” used by the

country's officials “is widely criticized by migrants because it has been turned into a forced return,” according to the spokesperson for the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), an association that helps migrants in the country.

Because of all these challenges and the difficulties in improving the socioeconomic situation, President Kais Saïed is multiplying his conspiracy theories. Whether it's his opponents, social movements or even sub-Saharan migrants, it's always a general conspiracy targeting Tunisia, which has led some Tunisians to rally around him.

The conspiracy theory he keeps repeating is a method of governing. “Its systemic aspect provides a narrative that enables the current regime to stay in power despite the few results it has achieved since the coup of 25 July 2021. By linking the worsening of the multidimensional crisis to a generalized conspiracy, the Tunisian President manages to maintain social peace while continuing to roll out his authoritarian project.”¹¹ However, given the deterioration in economic and social conditions, there is no guarantee that this mode of governance can last.

⁹ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. “World Report 2024: Tunisia.” 2024. Available at: www.hrw.org/en/world-report/2024/country-chapters/tunisia.

¹⁰ “Tunisie: 7 250 migrants subsahariens sont rentrés 'volontairement' dans leur pays en 2024.” *InfoMigrants*, 23 January 2025. Available at: www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/62389/tunisie--7-250-migrants-subsahariens-sont-rentres-volontairement-dans-leur-pays-en-2024.

¹¹ “Tunisie : Le complotisme, clé de voûte de la gouvernance de Kaïs Saïd.” Fondation Jean Jaurès, 22/11/2023. www.jean-jaures.org/publication/tunisie-le-complotisme-cle-de-voute-de-la-gouvernance-de-kais-saied/.