



Tunisia Faces a Political Crisis After President Kais Saied Ousts the Country's Prime Minister and Suspends Parliament

Earlier this week, President Kais Saied triggered a political crisis in Tunisia following his decision to oust the country's prime minister and freeze parliament. The move comes in the midst of protests and growing anger against the government over its handling of the coronavirus pandemic, economic stagnation, and deteriorating public services. Saied's actions prompted celebratory rallies by some of his supporters, however many others – including pro-democracy activists – denounced them as a power grab and expressed concern with the legality of the behavior. U.S. officials under the Biden administration also voiced uneasiness, urging calm and conveying support for Tunisian efforts to move forward in line with democratic principles. The course of events that have transpired this week present a serious test for the state of democracy in Tunisia, but analysts are hopeful that the crisis will not devolve and will instead propel political opponents into dialogue with each other and result in a new compromise.

In his announcement of the move, President Saied stated that he would assume executive authority with the assistance of a fresh prime minister, and warned the country's citizens against any form of violent response. During the hours after the address, military vehicles surrounded both the parliament building and the state television building. Initially, some street clashes did erupt on Monday outside of the barricaded parliament between supporters of the president and others opposed to his actions, but fortunately in the subsequent days since then the demonstrations did not degrade into further violence. Saied also decreed a night-time curfew from 7pm until 6am local time on Tuesday as well as a ban on gatherings of more than 3 people in an attempt to avoid any potential escalation of the situation.

The majority of political parties in Tunisia criticized Saied's move as unconstitutional, but did call for dialogue to resolve the crisis and implored their supporters to exhibit restraint. President Saied tried to defend his behavior by claiming that his actions were appropriate under Article 80 of the constitution – which allows the president to take any measures in the event of "imminent danger" after consultation with the heads of government and parliament. However, there is legitimate doubt regarding whether or not the move would actually fall into the aforementioned category and besides, the president did not engage with other officials on the issue anyway. Ultimately, Saied's decision to act in such a manner was largely condemned as an assault on the democratic ideals and values that Tunisia is aspiring to uphold. The president has also been criticized for expressing that the 30-day period of the parliamentary suspension can be extended if needed – with observers pointing to this as clear proof of his intention to solidify his grip on power.

The United States reacted to the developments in Tunisia with a significant level of concern. While not directly categorizing Saied's actions as a coup, Biden administration officials signaled worry and stated that Tunisia must not squander its democratic gains. As such, Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged President Saied to adhere to both the principles of democracy and human rights. It remains to be seen how the crisis will play out over the course of the coming days and weeks.