



## Tunisian President Saied Faces Backlash from Pro-Democracy Advocates Over His Plans to Amend the Country's Constitution

During the preceding week, President Saied of Tunisia appeared on television in a live address to announce his intent to amend the country's constitution. Pro-democracy advocates and critics of the planned move have expressed opposition to it, stating that it signals Saied's goal is to consolidate power and remain in office with little to no political competition. Many have pointed to it as further proof of a coup, and also condemn Saied's attempts to limit and negate the parliament's authority which they rightfully fear may send Tunisia regressing back towards authoritarian rule. Additionally, there is debate over the mere legality – or lack thereof – of Saied's behavior, as some analysts contend that he is simply using the socioeconomic unease in the country as a means to tighten his grip on power. As one of the beacons of democratic hopes in the region, the manner in which events unfold in Tunisia could have major implications and therefore observers are keeping a close eye on how the crisis ultimately transpires.

The political crisis in Tunisia is more complicated than a straightforward coup or rise of a dictator. Tunisia has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The country's economy and unemployment rate have been significantly affected, hurting citizens who are now mostly concerned with ensuring stability and safety. For some, the answer to these issues is President Saied and his growing authoritarian "strongman" persona. It has been difficult to obtain completely revealing information on where public support for his actions lies, but there is evidence of a widespread and vocal pro-democratic opposition to Saied's behavior in recent months.

Pro-democracy advocates within Tunisia, the country's parliament, and the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) have been adamantly opposed to Saied's actions – which they label as a coup. These forces argue that the moves by President Saied are illegal and a clear violation of civil and human liberties. They are also concerned that with no voice in the Tunisian government, laborers and citizens will lose their rights to fair treatment and the ability to participate in the civic process. There are some points of difference in the pro-democracy movement. While many members of parliament met with a recent U.S. congressional delegation to address the crisis, the UGTT refused and cited it as an internal affair, claiming that foreign intervention will only worsen the backslide of Tunisian democracy. Regardless of these distinctions in opinion, these entities are united in their opposition to President Saied's authoritarian-like effort to consolidate power in a questionable manner.

President Saied, on the other hand, believes that his planned move to amend the constitution to gain more central authority is legal. However, critics of his actions point out that the suspension of parliament and the removal of his cabinet and prime minister highlight his complete disregard for the democratic process. While like many other nations Tunisia is undoubtedly in a state of crisis in part because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Saied seems focused on using this to his political advantage. Meanwhile, a regression back towards autocracy is a legitimate fear for the Tunisian populace who worry that it would slowly eliminate their ability to equally participate in a democratic system. As a result, advocacy groups and others remain anxious over the future and direction of Tunisia's political crisis.