



## Hundreds of Tunisian Demonstrators Take to the Streets to Protest Against High Prices and Food Shortages Amid the Country's Ongoing Political Crisis

During the preceding week, hundreds of demonstrators have taken to the streets of Tunisia in protest against surging prices and food shortages amid the country's ongoing political crisis. Earlier this month, the Tunisian government raised the price of cooking gas cylinders by 14%, the first such hike in over a decade. They also increased fuel prices for the fourth time this year in an effort to reduce energy subsidies, as authorities scramble to secure a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to save public finances from collapse. Compounding economic challenges is a high inflation rate of 9%, and food shortages that have resulted in massive price surges. Many Tunisians have reported spending hours searching for essential goods such as milk, butter, sugar, and rice, among others. During some of the recent protests organized by civil society groups and political parties, police used sticks and pepper spray to disperse demonstrators, arresting several of them. There is concern that deteriorating economic conditions, combined with dissatisfaction at the authoritarian-like actions of the Saied regime, could boil over into the potential for further civil unrest.

Tunisian President Kais Saied suspended parliament back in July of 2021, dismissing the country's prime minister and announcing plans to rule by decree – behavior that was widely condemned by pro-democracy advocates and defenders. Saied gradually initiated other actions aimed at consolidating his power and altered the country's democratic constitution. The referendum on the new constitution was boycotted by much of Tunisian civil society and the population at-large, with a turnout of only around 30%. The document grants almost unlimited power to President Kais Saied, and was thus denounced by pro-democracy opposition groups. Some of the other autocratic actions taken by Saied included the issuing of a decree which dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, the country's top independent judiciary body. Less than a week after this, Saied established a council filled with members that he himself chose. The decree granted the biased pro-Saied council the right to appoint judges and oversee transfers, promotions, dismissals, and resignation requests. Saied granted himself the power to object to any of the council's planned actions and the ability to directly dismiss any judge. His government has announced plans for legislative elections in December, however many political parties have indicated their intent to boycott these too so as not to give them undeserved legitimacy.

The ongoing political crisis in Tunisia has been coupled with economic challenges as well, which prompted this past week's demonstrations. Protesters took to the streets holding loaves of bread in the air, angry youths burned tires, and others chanted slogans like "jobs, freedom, and national dignity" and "we can't support crazy price hikes." President Saied has been trying to distract Tunisians from the grim reality that the country is suffering from major economic difficulties and the problems have only been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, which has sent grain prices skyrocketing. Tunisia is also facing a dire financial predicament with public sector spending being a large portion of the state's budget. In 2020, the public debt rose 70% above the country's gross domestic product. The nation's lack of a well-regulated private sector has left many citizens reliant on the state for jobs and subsidized goods and services. This has created an unsustainable economic imbalance that is seemingly crashing down. The government is seeking an IMF bailout to help it fund its budget and debt repayments. Without an IMF bailout, Tunisia would likely have to borrow internally, restricting credit to local businesses in ways that experts say could further harm the economy and anger citizens.