



### [The Mass Rallies Taking Place in Tunisia Ahead of the Upcoming October Election](#)

Over this past week, thousands of Tunisians have taken to the streets to protest against President Kais Saied as the upcoming October election in the country draws closer. The Saied government itself has engaged in a significant pre-election crackdown, arresting dozens of members of opposition parties and those participating in the rallies, according to human rights monitoring groups such as Amnesty International. Due to Saied's 2021 coup and efforts to consolidate power since then, many observers have looked towards the election as an important opportunity to push back against the democratic backsliding within the country as a result of Saied's measures. The arbitrary arrests have come as Tunisians decry the Saied government for its actions, and demand the release of all political prisoners, activists, journalists, and other concerned citizens that have been detained for merely criticizing his autocratic behavior. This has included the use of self-appointed commission members to intimidate candidates and try to suppress opposition in order to manipulate the outcome of the impending election.

Saied was originally elected in the country's 2019 presidential election, overseen by the country's Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE). He had been involved in various social and political youth organizations in the early 2010s, a demographic that he would gain his most support from in the election. Saied ran as an independent outsider, and ironically, advocated for his plans to combat corruption, the institution of recall elections, and a focus on law and order – among other policies. He initially enjoyed support as a popularly-elected candidate, but his government started to face increasing unpopularity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Protests began to break out nationwide when in 2021, the country began to face economic failure and suffered a collapse of its healthcare system. Saied had been in a deadlock with various groups and parties in the country's parliament, including the Ennahda party, which paralyzed the government amid the crisis and caused the state's inadequate response. Then, on July 25th of that year, Saied dismissed the Mechichi cabinet, suspended the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, and revoked their immunity; actions that have been widely considered to be a self-coup aimed at consolidating power and dismantling democratic mechanisms in the country. Despite being in violation of Article 30 of the Tunisian Constitution, there was no constitutional court in place at the time to assess the legality of Saied's actions. Thus, he proceeded to further consolidate power, passing a decree which gave him the authority of appointment over the 7 members and spokesperson of the ISIE and later made his changes official with a low turnout constitutional referendum that was boycotted by much of the country.

The current hopes of pushing back against Saied's democratic backsliding have been hindered by his ISIE's detainment and blocking of many top opposition candidates from running, one of which was placed under arrest just two weeks ago. The Tunisian court has ordered the ISIE to reinstate two of the candidates, warning that failure to do so could jeopardize the election. However, the ISIE has not yet done so, which in effect has reduced the power of the judiciary and has served to legitimize concerns of a rigged election. What has also hampered pro-democracy efforts is that the opposition has failed to develop a unified response to the election, that being whether to boycott as they did in 2022 during the referendum, or choose to participate en masse and force Saied's government to blatantly rig the election in order to secure his "victory." The actions of either strategy reduce the impact that each has on the outcome, and this may lead to results that are of little effect to Saied and his government. Without a unified strategy, Saied and his government may easily be able to overcome the opposition and pro-democracy forces.

Unfortunately, concerns and coverage regarding the upcoming election from the international community have been minimal. Saied has shut down and restricted foreign media organizations in the country since the self-coup in 2021, and has continued to uphold these restrictions in light of the mass protests and controversy over his actions in the country. He has also barred NGOs and other organizations from any oversight or monitoring of the upcoming election, involvement that would have been normal in previous post-2011 elections. The international community has been focused on other major happenings in the region which have served to detract attention from the upcoming election in Tunisia, mainly the longstanding now nearly a year-old destructive Gaza War and the heightened tensions and fear of further escalations that its perpetuation has caused.

As the main success story to emerge from the 2011 Arab Spring, Tunisia is still looked at by many as a beacon of hope regarding the prospect of democracy in North Africa and the Middle East. The country's significance as the birthplace of the Arab Spring makes the results and legitimacy of the upcoming election something of significant political and symbolic importance for the future of the region. Since various countries have undergone political regressions over the past decade or so in what has been called the Arab Winter, Tunisia's past improvements prior to Saied's coup in 2021 make it a consequential case for many who wish to see democracy survive and spread.