



Rigged Election in Tunisia

Situated in the heart of North Africa, Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring back in late 2010. It became a country filled with the hopes and promises of democracy after the Tunisian people ousted former President Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. Dishearteningly, now fourteen years later, current President Kais Saied has seemingly secured his grip on the country for the foreseeable future in a rigged election that was manufactured by his regime. Observers and experts have noted that Saied ensured his "victory" long before election day, as political party leaders and candidates were disqualified from running and even imprisoned. The purported results from the government-controlled Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) contend that in the recent October 6th election, Saied won with 90.69% of the vote, with a low turnout of only 28.8%.

On election day, voters had three options on the ballot for president: Kais Saied himself; Zouhair Maghzaoui, who continues to voice his support for the president's self-coup against parliament; and Ayachi Zammel, who was not well known before the election. Back on September 2nd, Zammel was arrested in a move denounced by human rights groups and opposition leaders as another attempt to ensure that Saied faces no competition. Still, Zammel, imprisoned during the campaign's final month, garnered 7.35% of the vote. Saied's efforts to consolidate power in Tunisia began in July of 2021, when he suspended the elected parliament and held a constitutional referendum the next year seeking to transform the young democracy. The new constitution centralized power in the hands of the president, and weakened parliament's power. Saied tried to sell the move as necessary in order to end the parliament's ineffectiveness and corruption, but pro-democracy advocates pointed out how it was clearly aimed at solidifying his grip on power and weakening the checks and balances system in the country. Saied initiated more undemocratic actions during the lead-up to the recent presidential election, as he had potential candidates disqualified or arrested for trumped up charges such as allegedly violating state security, forging signatures, and sharing fake news. These and other actions by Saied have left no one with the political power to stop him, as he also had the once-independent ISIE taken over and replaced with loyal "yes men," while the courts were stripped of oversight over the election.

Unfortunately, those hoping for a strong foreign condemnation from the United States or European Union (EU) will likely be disappointed, as neither has taken any real action or released an official statement. The only word out of the latter is from the EU Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who said that the EU "takes note of the position expressed by many Tunisian social and political actors regarding the integrity of the electoral process." No action from the EU has been promised. This starkly contrasts with the Venezuelan presidential election held only this past July, which saw denouncement and demands for the results to be released from multiple nations and international organizations. While Venezuela did have a deal with the U.S. to ease sanctions on its oil if it held a free and fair election, a significant difference between the Tunisian and Venezuelan elections was turnout. In Venezuela, turnout was around 60%, double that seen in Tunisia. Additionally, in Venezuela, the opposition had united behind a single candidate, whereas in Tunisia, there were competing strategies on how to handle the election: one camp had encouraged a full-on boycott of the election, while a second camp had called for mass participation in order to overwhelm the Saied regime's attempts to manipulate the outcome of the election. The high turnout and strong opposition candidate in Venezuela appear to have forced incumbent leader Nicolás Maduro to seriously rig the results. In Tunisia, the decision by much of the opposition to boycott the election looks

to have paved the way for Saied to avoid needing to interfere with the ballots themselves. The result strongly implies that Saied's supporters turned out to vote, while his opposition was divided, with a significant number of citizens sitting out the election.

Meanwhile, U.S. officials, preoccupied with wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and seeking to prevent the outbreak of wider-scale conflict in the Middle East, have not dedicated much foreign policy focus on what is transpiring in Tunisia. The U.S. government likely does not have the will or political bandwidth for serious engagement regarding Tunisia, especially since there is no clear opposition leader to back and no immediate risk for any conflict or instability to spread – unlike what is taking place between Israel and Iran. One U.S. Senator, Chris Murphy (D-CT), did release a [statement](#) in which he called out President Saied for systematically dismantling Tunisia's democracy, thus robbing the Tunisian people of their ability to voice their opposition to his autocracy. Senator Murphy called on the United States to continue its "support of the Tunisian people, civil society, and independent media."

Another factor affecting foreign reactions is Tunisia's strategic location. It is the northernmost African country, located on the Mediterranean just south of Italy and has therefore become a popular route for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to get into Europe. This led to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni making four visits to Tunisia in 2024, with controlling migration a top priority. Meloni and Saied have signed agreements between Tunisia and Italy, giving economic aid in exchange for cooperation on regulating migration, as officials seem to be focused on preventing irregular crossings and allowing an increasing number of Tunisians to work legally in Italy. Many across Europe, which continues to see a surge in far-right and anti-immigration parties, are most interested in a stable government in Tunisia. Thus, European leaders might fear that speaking out against Saied would jeopardize coordination on these aforementioned initiatives.

Saied's "electoral triumph" theoretically gives him five years until the next election in 2029. What would potentially happen then is unknown, as the modified 2022 Tunisian constitution does include the president being limited to two terms but it removed the provision from the 2014 constitution which stated that it may not be amended to increase the number of terms. In light of Saied's actions over the past several years since the July 2021 coup, it is clear that no strong checks and balances exist within the system that Saied has manipulated to benefit him. If Saied calls for a referendum to be allowed to run for additional terms, not much appears to stand in his way. However, as noted by various outlets, the recent election results are similar to the last election before the Tunisian revolution which ousted Ben Ali. As such, the fate of Tunisian democracy could again fall into the hands of the people at-large, who might need to be willing to stand up for it in the face of Saied's repression.