

The establishment of an absolutist regime in Tunisia

Tuesday 13 September 2022, by [LEROUGE Dominique](#) (Date first published: 2 September 2022).

One year after his coup de force of 25 July 2021 [1], the Tunisian president Kaïs Saïed has had a new constitution adopted by referendum, giving him almost all the powers.

The Constitution of 25 July 2022 establishes a regime in which the president has most of the powers. [2] Placed under his direct authority, the government no longer needs to obtain a vote of confidence from the legislature. Furthermore, the president can now submit laws directly to parliament. He will also have the possibility of remaining in power after his term of office expires.

This system should be completed before the end of the year by the election of a legislative assembly, as well as an assembly of representatives of local authorities, whose mode of designation and role remain unknown for the moment. If the whole system is put in place, it will be the end of the period opened by the “Tunisian Spring” of 2011.

The main features of the new regime

- Autocratic: on this point, Saïed goes even further than Ben Ali because he has simultaneously the executive, constituent and legislative powers.
- Authoritarian: for the time being, freedom of expression continues to exist, but there is a worrying decline in press freedom and a growing police crackdown. Cyber-harassment and physical threats against opponents by supporters of President Kaïs Saïed are also on the rise. “We are still far from the ferocious repression exercised under Ben Ali. We still enjoy freedom of expression. We don’t have thousands of prisoners of conscience like in Egypt, but the foundations of absolute power are there”, denounces Amna Guellali, from Amnesty International. [3]
- Populist: relying on the paralysis of the parliamentary regime put in place after 2011, Saïed attributes to himself an almost messianic power to embody the “people” as well as an almost divine mission of redemption. His policy involves bypassing or eliminating all intermediaries between him and the people, particularly the political parties, which he considers to be ‘dying’.

Contrary to Ben Ali, who spared the “elites” and sought to include them in the mafia-like networks of the party in power, Saïed launched a permanent war against them, resonating in particular with the state of mind of a large part of the youth and the most disadvantaged.

- Violently opposed to all political parties: this hostility affects the parties that were in power after 2011 (including Ennahdha), those that were not, as well as the pre-2011 nostalgic party led by a former deputy secretary general of Ben Ali’s party.
- An Arab nationalist dimension: unlike Ben Ali, who bowed down to Western powers, Saïed claims

to be a member of the Arab and Muslim culture, which he believes is the authentic culture of the Tunisian people. He exalts national sovereignty in the face of “foreign interference” accused of organising “plots” that prevent the people from truly expressing their will.

- Omnipresent religious references: of course, Kaïs Saïed is not an “Islamist” in the sense of an affiliation to a Muslim Brotherhood-type party. But he is deeply pious and religious and openly claims to be part of Tunisia’s Islamic heritage. Since his election in 2019, Saïed has, for example, relied on the Koran to defend the maintenance of inheritance inequality between men and women. Article 5 of the new constitution also states that Tunisia is part of the Islamic *Ummah* [community of believers]. In contrast to Ennahdha’s political Islam, Saïed’s is more of a state Islam that could develop into a form of theocracy.

Dominique Lerouge

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Footnotes

[1] DL, Inprecor N° 689-690 septembre-octobre 2021 [“La résistible ascension de Kaïs Saïed?”](#).

[2] For a detailed analysis of the 2022 Constitution, see Amnesty International, 19 August 2022 [“TUNISIE. L’ADOPTION DE LA NOUVELLE CONSTITUTION NE DOIT PAS ENTERINER L’EROSION DES DROITS HUMAINS”](#).

[3] *Libération*, 14 July 2022.