

## Democracy Development in Tunisia During President of Kais Saied

Mohamad Fuat Najib<sup>1)</sup>, Subaidi<sup>2)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup> Middle Eastern Studies, Postgraduate Program of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta

<sup>2)</sup> Lecturer Middle Eastern Studies, Postgraduate Program of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta  
Corresponding Author: Mohamad Fuat Najib, Email: [fuadnajib345@gmail.com](mailto:fuadnajib345@gmail.com)

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**Abstract.** After general election, fair and competitive elections in 2019 with the election of Kais Saied as president, Tunisia's democracy has been a success. However, political turmoil arose after President Saied's political actions by issuing emergency decrees; dissolving parliament, removing the prime minister and controlling executive institutions were considered to hinder democratic development in Tunisia. This research looks at the elements of democratization development using Robert Dahl's theory of democracy on the one hand and on the other hand will look at President Saied's autocratic actions using Levitsky and Ziblatt's theory of otritarianism. The method used in this research is a microscopic research method, which looks at parts of President Saied's political actions in the democratization process in Tunisia. The results of this study indicate that the democratization process in Tunisia is considered to have been successful as seen from the implementation of elections, public participation and freedom of the press. However, the development of democracy has stagnated due to actions that occurred after President Saied issued decrees such as rejection of the democratic system, control of the media and repressive actions showing the decline of democratic values in Tunisia towards authoritarianism. This shows the decline of democratization principles in Tunisia after the achievements obtained after the Arab Spring.

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**Keywords:** Tunisia; Democracy; Authoritarianism; Kais Saied

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### INTRODUCTION

The current wave of modernization marked by democratization has swept the Middle East countries, including Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. The Middle East region, which previously implemented a monarchical system of government that indicated authoritarianism, has transitioned into a democratic system of government in this modern era. The transition to democracy in the Middle East cannot be forgotten with the revolution in Tunisia that successfully overthrew the authoritarian regime of Zine Abidin Bin Ali. This was followed by Egypt with the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, and Libya managed to overthrow the dictatorial regime under Muammar Gaddafi who had been in power for

forty years (Sahide, 2019). As well as several other Arab countries such as Jordan, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. This was an influence of the early revolutionary events in Tunisia.

The revolutionary events that took place are commonly referred to by Arabs as *Al-Rabiu al-arabiy*, while Westerners call it The Arab Spring (Burdah, 2014). These revolutionary events were a breath of fresh air for Arab societies that were previously under authoritarian regimes, and became the first step towards a democratic life. Efforts to build a democratic transition in the Arab world after The Arab Spring experienced many challenges and showed at least some success in structuring democratic development in Tunisia. Tunisia began to implement political

reforms after the revolution by organizing free and fair elections to elect the president and parliament. The success of democracy in Tunisia is also defined as a representative democracy by having executive, legislative and judicial bodies as in countries that implement a democratic system of government. Therefore, Tunisia is considered as an example of success in implementing democratic transition for its rapid work towards post-revolution transition and political change shows that the democratization process has been ongoing until today.

As defined by Juan Linz and Al Stepan, Tunisia completed its democratic transition in 2011 when elites agreed to hold competitive elections to produce a government with a sufficient level of authority (Linz, 1996). Stepan wrote in the Journal of Democracy in 2012 arguing that what remains in Tunisia is a consolidated democracy (Stepan, 2012). Samuel Huntington, argued that Tunisia became a consolidated democracy by the end of 2014 (Huntington, 1991). The success of democracy in Tunisia is also supported by civil society participation (Lary Diamond, 2016), political participation (El-Khawas, 2019), protection of human rights (Charrad, 2017), media freedom (Aman, 2015) and the important role that women and youth have played (Sarah, 2018).

Saied's election as president in the 2019 (Aljazeera, 2019) general election is a form of democratic dynamics that the Tunisian state is

undergoing. In fact, Saied has taken controversial policies that have raised concerns that they will threaten the development of democracy in Tunisia. Saied on July 25, 2021, issued an emergency policy to freeze the powers of the Prime Minister and members of parliament in Tunisia (Boudharoau, 2021). Saied took over all legislative and political decisions (Radeck, 2022). Thus, the actions taken by Saied will threaten the development of democracy that is being built, because it has taken over the powers of parliament and the prime minister who are representatives of democratic structures.

Saied, a former constitutional law professor, claims his actions are in accordance with Article 80 (Tunisia's Constitutions of 2014, 2018), which authorizes the President's right to take emergency measures by taking over work functions in situations of danger that threaten the independence of the state (Chettaoui, 2021) and the normal functioning of the state for 30 days. However, Article 80 also mandates that the president's actions must involve the prime minister and the speaker of parliament for consultation and parliament continues to work according to its functions instead of being frozen (Bajec, 2022). To protect his policies, Saied is protected by security forces, both from the military and the police (Tarek Amara and Angus Mcdowall, 2021). This has led to the perception that the army may be loyal to President Saied and also

have major political consequences for its actions.

There is a definition of democracy that is missing an important part of the way democracy has worked in many parts of the world: the purpose of a democratic government is to provide protection, freedom and promote the rights, interests and welfare of the people (Sinaga, 2013). Therefore, democracy requires people to freely take part and participate in government politics (Kasih, 2018).

According to Hamrita, one of the main freedoms that Tunisian society has recently embraced after the Arab Spring is freedom of speech (Hamrita, 2016). But in reality, the bad political situation in 2021 after Saied issued a decree, the right to speak should be questioned again. This is because the government restricts press media that express themselves online (Yee, 2022). For example, the police carried out repressive actions by storming the Al-Jazeera office, which clearly violated freedom of the press (Grewal, 2021). On another occasion, political instability impacted the protests in January 2021, the police repressively used tear gas to disperse the protesters which led to the death of a 21-year-old protester and others were injured by gas canisters (Slimane, 2021).

Looking at the events that took place under President Saied, it seems that Tunisia is declining in its democratic principles. This is contrary to what has been researched by many

scholars who say that Tunisia has successfully fulfilled the principles of democracy. Therefore, the researcher wants to focus on President Saied's political actions in the democratization process in Tunisia seen from the government's unpreparedness in the face of modernization and political competition within the government structure and the economic crisis that cannot be resolved. The development of democratization under President Saied experienced events that led to the decline of democratic principles, and returned Tunisia to the dictatorship or changed the democratic system with a different style. The need for cooperation between the government as the holder of power and civil society in Tunisia in strengthening democratic institutions, improving human rights, and ensuring press freedom and civil liberties for all citizens. The need for democracy education through academic classrooms, in the context of democracy, education serves to instill and socialize democratic values to educators (Widyatiningtyas et al., 2023).

Therefore, the researcher formulates the following problem formulation; How was the development of democratization in Tunisia during the time of President Kais Saied? And whether President Kais Saied's policies will hinder the development of democratization in Tunisia?

## RESEARCH METHODS

The type of research used in this research is qualitative method. While the

method used in this research is a microscopic research method, namely by looking at parts of political actions and structures based on government policies. While the research approach used in this research is a socio-political approach. The socio-political approach is intended to analyze existing data based on the socio-political glasses that occur in Tunisia. The data used are facts related to President Kais Saied's decision to freeze parliament and revoke the position of prime minister which has a threatening impact on democratic development in Tunisia. Because the object is thematic, the sources used are news both visual media and magazines, journals, articles and issues of democracy in Tunisia after the Arab Spring.

This research uses the theory of democracy and the theory of authoritarianism. The theory of democracy used in this research is the theory of democracy according to Robert E. Dahl ([Dahl, 1971](#)), which looks at aspects such as political participation, civil liberties and competitive and fair elections, or what is known as the concept of polyarchy democracy. On the other hand, this research also uses the theory of authoritarianism according to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt ([Levitsky, 2018](#)). Levitsky and Ziblatt identify aspects that can lead to the decline of democracy and the emergence of authoritarian regimes. These aspects include: rejection of the democratic system, control of the media and repressive actions.

## DISCUSSION

### **The Development of Democracy in Tunisia Under President Kais Saied**

The general election on 13 October 2019 was a dynamic process of democratization in post-Arab Spring Tunisia. The election of the new president, Kais Saied ([Aljazeera, 2019](#)), a former law professor who is not from a political party, is evidence of the freedom of choice used by the people in the voting booth. The general election agenda that has been held three times in Tunisia as a way to replace leadership shows that Tunisia has succeeded in consolidating democracy. According to ([Jack Snyder, 2003](#)) in observing the dynamics of democratization in Tunisia, that Tunisia has reached a mature stage of democracy with periodic elections. According to ([Sorensen, 2008](#)), Tunisia has entered the consolidation phase by embedding the culture of democracy in the political culture ([Sahide et al., 2022](#)).

Democratization success story continues with 2019 presidential and legislative power shifts in Tunisia and political instability. Tunisia is still facing the challenges of an unfinished economic crisis including increasingly rampant corruption, and public distrust of the political parties that currently control parliament ([Faten Ben Slimane Master, 2021](#)). Saied's election in the general election was driven by the desire of young people who wanted a change in the political arena as well as Saied as a new person in politics ([Salah,](#)

2019). It is a breath of fresh air to hope in the progress of democratization, as Tunisia prepares to overhaul the government structure with a new face and a new president who has received support from 90 percent of young Tunisians peacefully (Michael Safi, 2019). In its efforts to maintain political stability, Tunisia was hit by the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, which became the biggest test of the government and society in handling it, including people in rural and marginalized areas (Yerkes, 2020).

At least, Tunisia has come a long way in achieving political stability. It has conducted free and fair elections, and created a constitution to avoid a return to authoritarian rule. The factors that brought authoritarianism back to the forefront of democratization in Tunisia were economic crisis and political instability (Posusney, M. P., & Angrist, 2018). In addition, there was public dissatisfaction with the government, which was deemed unable to solve social and economic problems, as well as a weak legal system and rampant corruption (Zoubir, 2015). Despite the fact that Tunisia is still facing several crises continued in 2021 experiencing political instability in the government structure. President Saied, on July 25, 2021, issued an emergency policy to save Tunisia from the crisis that occurred (Atlantic Council, 2021). The policy issued by President Saied was to freeze parliament and revoke the position of prime minister and democratic institutions. The factor for this policy issued by

President Saied is to save the country from growing corruption and the inability of parliament to deal with the economic and health crisis that the country is facing. President Saied used Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution in his decision, because the article gives the president the right to take the necessary steps to save the country from dangers that threaten the integrity of the state. However, Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution also involves parliament in decision-making, which President Saied did not do in his decision.

The decision taken by President Saied seems to have been planned. The reason is that President Saied, who leads Tunisia, is not from a political party, will face a parliament that has party political interests. The political turmoil at the beginning of President Saied's reign was the overthrow of the Prime Minister, Elyes Fakhfakh with the aim of overthrowing the Tunisian government under President Saied (Suhartono, 2021). The actor behind Fakhfakh's overthrow was the Ennahda Party, which had a majority in the elections. Ennahda was in coalition with the Heart of Tunisia and Karama parties to perpetuate its actions, but Fakhfakh had resigned before being ousted and gave his mandate to President Saied. Hichem Mechichi was nominated as Prime Minister by the Ennahda Party as the majority vote in parliament rather than the President. A cabinet reshuffle under Minister Mechichi followed, removing Ministers who were in

coalition with President Saied and replacing them with Ministers from Ennahda and coalition parties. This sparked a dispute between the Ennahda Party and President Saied.

President Saied has maneuvered to maintain his power by taking over the powers of the internal security apparatus (police). Under the Tunisian Constitution the police are under the control of the Prime Minister, while the military are under the control of the President. President Saied realizes that armed force is the key to success in his future political steps. The support of the security forces, both police and military, has been his crutch (Ahmad & Fadillah, 2021). President Saied issued a Presidential Decree which read among other things; dissolution of parliament, dismissal of Prime Minister Mechichi and several ministers who disagreed with the President and took over executive power. The military and police immediately secured the policies issued by the president, such as blocking vehicle access to parliament with armored vehicles and detaining members who challenged the presidential decree (Koestanto, 2021). Democratic institutions that serve as barometers to measure democracy such as the conduct of free and fair elections, a progressive constitution, national dialogue, civil society and a free press (Laryssa Chomiak, 2021) seem to have disappeared under President Saied.

Although, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Tunisia managed to establish formal institutions of democratic governance such as a new constitution, a parliament with political parties and elections. Political parties that were meant to represent the values and spirit of democratization by prioritizing social justice and equitable economic distribution to the entire society. Instead, they have become powers that privilege a small elite group with power, money and power relations. The result is the growing distrust of civil society towards politicians, political parties, elections and other democratic institutions. The loss of confidence in civil society is visible in street protests, migration, occasional violence and a dangerous disillusionment with the idea and practice of democracy (Entelis, 2021).

The government's inability to address economic challenges is a serious problem for Tunisian society (Arab Barometer, 2019). Political parties that were supposed to represent the needs of the people have failed to represent the interests of different regions or economic classes and have instead focused on cultural issues (S, 2020). Civil society and some labor unions have taken on the role of defending the interests of many Tunisians by providing space to engage in public life. President Saied, who has taken power into his own hands, has managed to solve some of the problems that the parties were unable to address. For example, he managed to reduce deaths in the COVID 19 pandemic outbreak,

working with the Union of Retail Stores to cut product prices ([La Presse de Tunisie, 2021](#)). Although these measures were not enough to curb inflation, especially in food prices ([Mosaique FM, 2021](#)). The judiciary has begun cracking down on politicians suspected of involvement in corruption, money laundering and tax evasion ([The Arab Weekly, 2021](#)), as well as misusing state projects ([al-Araby al-Jadid, 2021](#)).

The consolidation of power under a direct President may encourage corrupt practices and unequal justice for all Tunisians. Large corporations can easily reach agreements with central authorities without the need to convince multiple institutions. In addition, there is an overlap between the interests of individuals and society as seen in President Saied's "general will" campaign, but the power is fully vested in the President. A clear example of this overlap is President Saied's decision to increase phosphate production, which is in conflict with the long-standing activism of environmental organizations ([Independent Arabic, 2021](#)). It appears that President Saied as the holder of full power has failed to distribute it to all Tunisians. In order to achieve democratic progress to address some of these issues, Tunisia needs political parties, which President Saied banned on July 25, to represent the interests of a wide range of issues. Despite the practices of party members that do not reflect the representative function.

Political parties can play a positive role together with community organizations, trade unions, civil society and other democratic institutions. A national dialogue process involving all actors to create the ideal of an equitable state. Ending corruption and improving judicial capacity are prerequisites for the country's progress. These goals can be achieved by establishing a Constitutional Court, strengthening the judiciary and creating new laws on immunity for parliament without fully consolidating power in the hands of the President. Parties should be open to challenges and innovations based on democratic ideals such as representing bottom-up interests and addressing polarization by making the democratic system accessible to the public, especially young people ([Rennick, 2021](#)).

### **Democratization at the Crossroads between democracy and authoritarianism**

President Saied has the full power to push for change in the fight against corruption, strengthen the rule of law, hold the government accountable for its incompetence and most importantly to fix the economic crisis. However, the reality is that President Saied has acted in the opposite direction to authoritarianism. Repressive and violent actions against anti-government protesters, imposing travel bans on opposition politicians, and even trying to jail activists for critical posts on social media ([Samaro, 2021](#)). The

unending economic crisis is also in the President's hands.

Several journalists, lawyers, political opposition and civil society figures have been prosecuted for their posts or criticism in the media. Three journalists have been charged with "spreading false information" under Decree Law 2022-54. The decree, enacted by Saied in September 2022, imposes a five-year prison sentence and a fine of 50,000 Dinars (approximately €14,900) for anyone who knowingly uses communication networks and information systems to generate, promote, publish or transmit false information or rumors. The maximum penalty is 10 years in prison for defamation of state officials (Hamadi, 2023). Elyes Gharbi, a radio broadcaster, protested with dozens of journalists outside the El Gorjani Police Research Department in Tunis in support of two journalists under investigation by the authorities. "We are here because we are reproached for certain comments made in the May 15, 2023 program. The two journalists were detained for their posts criticizing the government, because journalists have the right to criticize, therefore, they criticize in a constructive spirit, a spirit where there is freedom of speech, freedom of thought and we will defend it. We once again raise the alarm against the deterioration of freedoms in the country and the legal proceedings that target journalists, lawyers and trade unionists, and

other people because of comments, articles or even songs" (Africanews, 2023).

SNJT deputy head Amira Mohamed warned of "an imminent danger to press freedom in Tunisia, today press freedom is really under threat," she told AFP. The SNJT warned in its annual report of repressive measures against journalists and pressure on editors to ensure favorable coverage for the government. SNJT noted that President Saied has not held an open dialogue or press conference since his assumption of power July 25, 2021, reflecting that citizens are not recognized to know what is happening in their country.

The events and the President's decision against the media took place in a context of increasing restrictions on individual freedoms. With the events that took place, Tunisia dropped to 121 out of 180 in the world press freedom index published by Reporters Without Borders, on Wednesday, May 3, on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day. Since July 25, 2021 after the President took control of the institutions, the country has dropped 49 places. After suspending and then dissolving parliament, Tunisia's president has reversed press freedom gains, which are generally regarded as one of the most important achievements following the Arab Spring revolutions (North Africa Post, 2022).

The actions that followed President Saied's assumption of power in Tunisia on July 25, 2021, are actions that will lead Tunisia



towards authoritarianism. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblitz say, there are several indicators that will bring a democratic country back to authoritarianism, such as the rejection of democratic rules, full control of the media and the use of violence against its citizens. President Saïd, supported by the military, managed to secure his decision on July 25, 2021, which issued a decree with several points such as freezing Parliament, removing the Prime Minister and other democratic institutions. A demonstration by Tunisian journalists over the increasing repression and intimidation of the press since the seizure of power by President Kais Saïd on July 25, 2021. It was organized by the Tunisian Journalists Union SNJT, which denounced the authorities' attempts to tame the media and turn it into an information channel with propaganda purposes. Political instability impacted protests in January 2021, with police repressively using tear gas to disperse protesters leading to the death of a 21-year-old protester and others injured by gas canisters (Slimane, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Tunisia is a country that is considered successful in consolidating democracy after the Arab Spring. On October 19, 2019, Tunisia held another general election with the election of Kais Saïd as President. This means that Tunisia has succeeded in consolidating democracy

if it uses the notion of the implementation of periodic elections in a competitive, free and fair manner. On July 25, 2021 President Saïd issued an emergency decree which contained freezing Parliament, revoking the Prime Minister and taking over executive power. The President's decree was supported by the military to secure the palace and parliament building. President Saïd's decision initially received support from the Tunisian people and several parties because people did not trust the parties that dominated in parliament. President Saïd had full power through the lens of the new authoritarianism, but he failed to address the economic problems. Civil society took to the streets to protest the unresolved economic crisis. Media and TV channels were controlled by the authorities for propaganda purposes. Repressive actions taken by police officers against protesters in January 2021 that left one person dead and injured. The actions taken by President Saïd show Tunisia's return to authoritarianism like the government before the Arab Spring revolution. Tunisia is a country that has successfully consolidated democracy compared to the countries that experienced the Arab Spring revolutions. Now Tunisia with the events that occurred shows some actions that lead

to authoritarianism. As stated by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, actions such as the rejection of democratic rules, complete control of the media and the use of violence against its citizens have emerged, signaling a return to authoritarianism in the Tunisian state. The freedom of the press achieved after the Arab Spring has been lost, indicating the decline of democratic principles in Tunisia.

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