Arab Reform Initiative

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The ghost people and populism from above: The Kais Saied case

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Tunisian President Kais Saied chairs a ministerial cabinet meeting at Carthage Palace in Tunis, Tunisia on 13 December 2021. ©AA/Tunisian Presidency

In recent months, several political concepts were stretched into taking several interpretations in Tunisia, either to legitimize or denounce Kais Saied's measures: "democracy", "popular sovereignty", "coup", and of course "populism". This article will be focusing on the latter. Populism: a catch-all word used mainly to denounce political opponents who would have the misfortune of addressing the people rather than their peers. Historically, it has been known to be a malleable concept despite having some well-defined characteristics. [1]) A populist movement is born in moments of crisis of representative democracy and offers itself as a solution by reinventing the democratic model to make it more inclusive. As such, Kais Saied's platform during the 2019 elections can be deemed to align with this political tendency. Kais Saied's brand of populism can be identified based on two observations: on the one hand, this populism subscribes to a Tunisian dynamic of relentless fighting for equality that began with the revolution, and on the other hand, it is an extension of the populist waves rippling through different democratic regimes around the world.

Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisians have fought countless battles for equality. Over the past decade, equality has been at the heart of various social movements: at the territorial level, people called for equality among regions against a backdrop of strong disparity between the coast and the hinterland as well as in their relations with the State (clientelism, nepotism, institutional violence, etc.) or among citizens themselves (abolishing discrimination, particularly based on gender, skin colour, or geographical origin, right to dignity in the name of equal belonging to the nation). Far more symbolic, this call for equality also underpins a struggle for recognition in a population that has been systematically classified, compartmentalized, and segregated into two categories: the "forward thinkers" and the "backward thinkers", the "educated" and the "ignorant", the "modern" and the "traditional". The revolution has ushered in the extraordinary rise of those who, for decades, have been rejected and marginalized by the State. Moreover, in Tunisia, populism was a reaction to the global movement of "de-democratization"[2] of a representative democracy stripped of its essence, after politics were reduced to issues of stakeholder participation, transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption. By relying on "technocrats" and experts from the private sector, successive governments have sidelined the political and economic issues that were raised by the revolution since 2011: an economic

development model, equality among regions, relationship to law enforcement, employment, etc.

Although Kais Saied's project seems to bring back the matters of the people's equality and sovereignty to the forefront of the political agenda, it has quickly reached its limits: from the 2019 "explanation campaign" to sidelining the people since the 25 July 2021 protests, the president's brand of populism is a populism from above. Unable to politically galvanize the population, the president today is reviving the practices of those authoritarian leaders who ruled Tunisia from 1956 to 2011.

A Populism of Necessity

While the deprived populations under Ben Ali were hoping for a radical change in their daily lives after the revolution, particularly in terms of employment, regional development, and citizenship, they found themselves before an economically muted "democratic transition". Lawyers, experts, and political parties had personally invested in this transition, committed to putting a formally democratic regime on track. However, this transition barely considered issues of territorial inequalities, and, therefore, the issue of equality, thereby undermining the very foundations of a democratic transition that was supposed to take over from a revolution built on the "work, freedom, dignity" demands. Since 2011, successive regimes have left Tunisia in want of an economic vision, beyond the endless replications of the same: extroversion of the economy based on low wages, and the tackling of social discontent in precarious and poorly paid public jobs. The democratic transition stakeholders have only been playing the waiting game.[3]

This "organized oblivion of the social issues" was quickly combined with the democratic stalemate of the transition itself: it has imposed a growing lockdown of politics through a so-called technocratic rationale.[4] In addition, spreading power and decision-making amongst various national and international actors has increasingly eroded any idea of popular sovereignty beyond elections. Without much resistance, it has been replaced by the idea of governance and dialogical participation among "stakeholders": the closed circle of donors-State-experts-civil society. This is how the "young Tunisian democracy" was quickly caught up in the

pitfalls of neoliberal de-democratization: "governance" to replace government, de-politicization, and increasing de-confliction of political stakes in favour of expertise. As a result, Tunisia, like many countries across the world, has fostered outbreaks of populism.

Although the electorally contested responses do not date back to Kais Saied, [5] he was the first to propose a truly populist political response, i.e. pitting "elites" against "the people" to break away from the ruling regime in the name of radicalization of democracy.

By claiming to be of the people and against the elites, Kais Saied breaks away from Tunisian political history which usually classifies the people as either "forward or backward thinkers," in line with the most common trajectory followed by nations to catch up with Western modernization. He seems to align himself with those who, historically, have been left behind by the State, wanting to follow on the path of the revolution and its calls for equality.

The revolution's egalitarian momentum was slowed down at quite an early stage by the Troika government (2011-2013, dominated by Ennahdha), notably because of repressing social movements such as in Siliana in 2012. This impetus came to a screeching halt when Beji Caid Essebsi of the Nidaa Tounes party was "restored" as head of State in 2014. Claiming to be part of Bourguibism, he never ceased to want to reduce the revolution to a single incident. Limiting the revolution and its demands was notably and spatially reflected by the return of the Bourguiba statue on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, a symbolic location of the 2011 revolution. The "restoration" occurred with the support of Ennahdha, by now allied with Nidaa Tounes, but it has paid for its normalization with a widening rift with its base and its activists who have grown tired of swallowing the insult (Law for Administrative Reconciliation that whitewashed the old regime, marginalizing transitional justice despite the abuses incurred by Ennahdha supporters under the old regime).

Breaking Away: More Illusion Than Reality

Kais Saied's lead in the first round of the early presidential elections and his victory

against the media tycoon Nabil Karoui have brought back the "people" to the heart of politics. Raising once again the "the people want" slogan of the revolution, Saied asserted his position as a simple representative of the people. As the good populist he is, he would never specify this "people" to whom he claimed to be: no mention of social class, region, or other divisions fueling a political struggle over diverging interests. Simply put, an oligarchy in complete disconnect with the realities of the country, the “people”, had taken the reins. He, the outsider, embodied righteousness, integrity, and incorruptibility in a political space marred by a strenuous discourse on corruption for 10 years, and where the "fight against corruption" had become the only political prospect for a better future. As such, one could say that, to a fairly large extent, the election of Saied resulted from a misunderstanding: it was the image of Saied, incorruptible and "close to the people" that was elected rather than the democratic and populist project he proposed.

Once in power, Saied tried to embody a certain idea of equality, mainly through symbols, namely by welcoming representatives of social movements from disadvantaged regions to the Palace of Carthage. As close as Saied may seem to the people, the break he wants to embody has remained, after all, incomplete – more an illusion – because behind his so-called “from the people” discourse lies a paternalistic, vigilant, and pedagogical rhetoric, presuming the people’s ignorance, hence the need for those below to be enlightened by the more sophisticated. Although Saied may cut the distance between educator and students by stepping down from the pedestal, "it remains on a symbolic level, otherwise, the proximity would simply become ordinary."[6] Moreover, as Sadri Khiari observes, the people in Kais Saied's project may be called on to be the basis of sovereignty, but they are only welcome to participate in local affairs. Sovereign issues remain within the prerogatives of the president who is elected by universal suffrage. The issues on the e-estichara platform (E-consultation) speak volumes in this regard. Citizens are called to express their views on issues (such as health, education, environment, agriculture, culture) "in their regions" and not "in the country." On the other hand, sovereign issues (police, the army, economy, currency, justice, diplomacy) are immediately excluded as topics under this democratic discussion.

Saied's relationship with the law enforcement officers is another weakness. If there ever was an institution at the heart of perpetuating hierarchy in Tunisia, it is the police. It assaults daily young men in working-class neighbourhoods. Police violence incurred by this section of society has fallen on deaf ears with Saied. A true master of reducing politics to morals, in June 2011, following the outcry resulting from images of a teenager beaten and stripped by the police in the popular neighbourhood of Sidi Hassine in Tunis, Saied simply denounced the "isolated and individual violations," adding that "there is no enmity between the people and the police."[7] The last months before the coup were marked by an open conflict between the president and the head of government over the control of the Ministry of Interior. Therefore, Saied carefully avoided alienating security services, a strategy that paid off given that on the evening of 25 July, the police and their unions sided with him.

25 July: The Rise of Populism without A People

Since the coup of 25 July 2021, Kais Saied has continued to appeal to "the people", claiming to represent their sovereignty and their will, while being the sole captain of the ship. In his opinion, his actions are a direct manifestation of the people's will, thus erasing all elements of individual will and interests,[8] as is often the case with populist leaders. Saied went one step further when he talked to the minister of interior about hypothetical assassination plots targeting him and implied that "these assassination plots only aim to subvert the will of the people".

Saied's attempts to truly embody the people also involve categorically refusing to engage with political parties[9] and civil society actors or deal with the media (the Tunisian press has never been invited to any press conference he has held, and there is no official presidential spokesperson to whom the media could reach out). Saied refuses to go through middlemen, based on the desired osmosis with "the people". To fulfil this ambition, he goes to remarkable lengths: from 25 July to 20 September 2021, the only public statements by the Tunisian president were videos, filmed and edited by the President's office, in which he is seen giving monologues in front of an audience that was invited to the Palace (most of whom

were visibly uncomfortable). His means of communication by choice and the content of his speeches reflect the atypical nature of Saied's brand of populism since 25 July 2021: the victory of a populism where the people are conspicuously absent.

In an article entitled *"Un moment populiste en Tunisie: Temporalité électorale et temporalité révolutionnaire"* (A populist moment in Tunisia: Electoral temporality and revolutionary temporality), political scientist Michel Camau questioned whether "the populist *moment* [embodied by Saied's victory] will lead to a populist *movement*"[10] so powerful it could change the regime despite the reluctance of parliament. Today, after the successful overthrow of parliament and the political parties represented in it, the populist movement has yet to come. Since the evening of 25 July 2021, when thousands of people broke curfew to celebrate the collapse of the party system, only a few pro-Saied[11] protests were noticed in response to those calling for the return of the parliamentary system. After the protests of 4 October that brought together several thousand people supporting the head of State, Saied publicly referred twice to the 1,800,000 protesters supporting him,[12] although those figures were quite unrealistic. In fact, except for the celebratory demonstrations on the evening of 25 July, there has been no popular show of support equivalent to the cleaning campaigns that followed Saied's election. The victory of Kais Saied in 2019 may have constituted a win for certain people who succeeded in getting "one of their own" to power, much to the dismay of the political parties. However, Saied's accession to power in July 2021 did not prompt the same response: no mass protest movement seemed to have been launched by the people in the wake of the President's victory. The "people" did not engage politically, and this is probably where the misperception of Saied's victory in 2019 is most striking.

It is important to differentiate between two perceptions of popularity. First, popularity could refer to the approval given to a person or specific actions, measured by polls and approval rates. Based on this understanding, Saied could be considered popular, although the recent numbers show a downward trend.[13] On the other hand, if popularity indicates the capability of a person or specific actions to generate popular mobilization,[14] then Kais Saied's ability to mobilize has shrunk because of the exercise of power and because, in short, he has become

a "statesman", although he so wishes to continue to portray himself as the "man of the people". The coup carried out in the name of the "people" did not create a space allowing the "people" to have a say in politics and to make their voices heard – as demonstrated by the low levels of participation on the *E-estichara* platform, a portal intended to be the basis of the institutional reform Saied seeks.

Although the president has constantly addressed the "people", he never called upon them to mobilize, for a good reason. It wasn't until December that a popular online consultation was announced. On 20 September, Saied delivered his only speech in front of an audience in Sidi Bouzid. It showed the signs of the marginalization of the people. The president constantly claimed the audience as a witness, mainly to talk about his enemies using bellicose language. During half of his 40-minute speech, Saied denounced his "enemies" without naming them, and mentioned, without any detail, their transgressions, betrayals, conspiracies with other countries, and the subsequent harm he had incurred. He kept saying that, as proof, he had names and records that he could not reveal, to the great displeasure of the crowd. During the remainder of his speech, he sought to justify his decisions, notably his choice to invoke Article 80 of the Constitution which he decided to activate on 24 July after visiting the hospital of Redeyef. In addition to the endless self-justifications, what was most striking about this speech was that in the very first sentence, he affirmed that he had come to deliver his speech in Sidi Bouzid to set himself apart from the protesters rallying against him in the city centre of Tunis, implying that "the others" were "elitists" while he was "of the people". Therefore, the only reason for addressing the public was to respond to "enemies" (and not exactly because he had anything particular to say to the "people"). Saied was thus taking on the "enemies" head-on: leaving the people to do nothing but watch a war between the self-proclaimed "champion of the people" and the "enemies of the people".

Although Kais Saied did not elaborate on the reasons why he, the man who wields the most power in Tunisia since Ben Ali on 16 December 2010, cannot yet openly reveal the conspiracies, issues, and other attempts to destabilize power, these reasons are not exactly a mystery, especially when viewed from a political lens. The inability to reveal precisely who the enemies are and what they stand accused of, as well as the suspenseful wait for startling revelations, betray Kais Saied's

need to keep the threat alive and buy himself time as the citizens' thirst for answers grows. In fact, since 25 July, those whom Saied describes as "traitors" and "enemies" (members of Parliament, supporters of any and every political party, members of civil society, the media, and others) seem to be up against the ropes, struggling to mobilize and be heard while facing someone who has managed to wield absolute power with little difficulty.

So why such indignation? According to political scientist Nadia Urbinati, the existence of an enemy "persona" is necessary for every populist leader, to be used as a pretext to evade political responsibility: "Since the leader is only the mouth of the people, the things he does must be the things the people have asked him to do, and if he does not deliver, the responsibility must lie in the hands of the people's enemies, who never disappear (and never sleep either). Hence, the irresponsible leader relies heavily on conspiracy theory as a sort of "ideology of excuse"."[15] By emphasizing the ever-renewed need to fight in the name of the people against their enemies and their conspiracies, Saied refuels the waiting politics. As a result, Tunisians have found themselves in prolonged powerlessness because of the populist leader and the so-called efforts he made in the name of putting people back in power in the face of a parliamentary regime plagued by divisions.

The national consultation, followed by a referendum, seems to be too weak of an effort to compensate for the countless signs of rising authoritarianism in Tunisia since July 2021. In addition to arrests, house arrests, the conviction of activists and opponents, and police violence against journalists and civil society actors, Kais Saied's style of ruling ever since he became the sole captain of the ship ticks all the boxes of personal and authoritarian power that Tunisians have known all too well since 1956: the use of women as a measure of progressiveness, the ubiquitous presence of acts of State, and peculiar legal "instructions" in his exercise of power, the rhetoric of "enemies", "traitors", and "foreign conspiracies", and of course, surprise visits and the removal of administrative officials according to accidents and incidents. This form of authoritarian centralization combined with a refusal to take political responsibility for failures is far too familiar to anyone acquainted with the history of authoritarianism in Tunisia, to take Saied seriously when he claims to stand with the Revolution.

Armed with populism minus the people, Saied is doomed to sink into authoritarianism, with plenty of help from a justice system and a police force that still follow a draconian legal arsenal, kept from the days of the dictatorship. In fact, in 11 years of "democratic transition" that was supposed to rid the people of a police state, no political party has ever sought to challenge that legal system. Slowly but surely, due to the inability of political actors to lay down principles, start breaking away from the old order (by reviewing draconian laws, and ending police impunity), and reinforcing this break, Tunisia is edging closer to a dictatorship.

Endnotes

1. Tarragoni, Federico. 2019. *The democratic spirit of populism (L'esprit deḿocratique du populisme)*. Paris: The discovery (La découverte

2. See more in Brown, Wendy. 2017. *Undoing the demos: neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York: Zone Books.

3. See Meddeb, Hamza - Waiting as a government mode in Tunisia ("L'Attente comme mode de gouvernement en Tunisie") In Bono, Irene, Mibou Beatrice Meddeb, Hamza and Tozy Mohamed. *The State of Injustice in the Maghreb: Morocco and Tunisia (L'Etat d'injustice au Maghreb : Maroc et Tunisie*). Paris 2015

4. The interesting evolution of what "technocrat" meant in Tunisia should be noted here. It was used as a guarantee of competence (especially in the appointment of ministers), the adjective "technocrat" has been linked to individuals from the private sector as opposed to high-ranking government officials, effortless profit ensued, the type of quantification to which the State had to pursue.

5. Michael Camau, A populist moment in Tunisia: Electoral temporality and revolutionary temporality (Temporalité électorale et temporalité révolutionnaire), Tunisian Magazine for Political Science (Revue Tunisienne de Science Politique), Vol.1 / n°3, 2020

6. Michael Camau, A populist moment in Tunisia: Electoral temporality and revolutionary temporality (Temporalité électorale et temporalité révolutionnaire), Tunisian Magazine for Political Science (Revue Tunisienne de Science Politique), Vol.1 / n°3, 2020

7. Statements 11 June 2021

8. "Not having a will of their own and being the mouth of the people, the leaders can circumvent the risk of appearing part of the establishment. This strategy is primed to have an impact on the performance of the populist leaders, who can always claim to be on the right track (because the people is their master) and who can always disclaim requests of accountability (as they are truly irresponsible, having no will of their own)" Urbinati, Nadia. 2019. *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p.146

9. Several political parties including Ennahda, as well as civil society organizations have called for "dialogue" in efforts to end the crisis through consensus, seeking to take up a national dialogue chaired by a quartet of civil society organizations (the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Human Rights League and the National Bar Association of Tunisia), following the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013. This request was curtly refused by Kais Saied during an interview with the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the Grain Board on 5 August 2021.

10. Michael Camau, Un moment populiste en Tunisie: Temporalité électorale et temporalité révolutionnaire, *Revue Tunisienne de Science Politique*, Vol.1 / n°3, 2020

11. A few dozen people were seen on 18 September on Habib Bourguiba Avenue facing the municipal theatre in response to anti-coup protests, and then on 25 September and finally on 4 October, a few thousand people showed their support for Saied on Habib Bourguiba Avenue and in some major cities in Tunisia.

12. Videos of these statements were later removed.

13. https://www.businessnews.com.tn/sondage-emrhod--kais-saied-a-de-plus-en-plus-de-mal-a-satisfaire-les-tunisiens,519,114452,3

how populism can unleash organizational skills, see the work of Jacques Rancière.

14. Differentiating between populism and demagogy, Federico Tarragoni wrote: "[The populist rhetoric] must produce a

15. Urbinati, Nadia. 2019. *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.143.

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