Arab Reform Initiative

Bawader / Commentary, 10 February 2022

Tunisia: Youth take a stand for/against the president's decisions and watch in limbo

Alessandra Bajec



Demonstrators gather at Avenue Habib Bourguiba to protest against Tunisian President Kais Saied's "extraordinary decisions" amid a heavy security presence in Tunis, Tunisia on October 10, 2021. ©Nacer Talel/AA

Following a decade of chaos in government affairs and economic turmoil, Tunisian youth have become increasingly disillusioned with the political system and apathetic towards post-2011 democratic politics. Ten years of disappointing governments and old unchanged policies alienated them from the country's political class. Less than two-in-ten Tunisian youth (17%) say they are still interested in politics, according to the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer surveys.

Yet, the very low trust in political parties and the lack of interest in party politics have not meant indifference to all political activity. *Young Tunisians essentially retracted from formal politics to operate mainly in civil society and grassroots activism.* Young people have been at the vanguard of important social movements and played an essential role in Kais Saied's campaign in November 2019. University students, activists as well as unemployed graduates organised using their civil society and community-based networks. At that time, most of the youth placed much hope in *President Saied whose idea of bottom-up politics resonated with their yearning for systemic change. His proposal is based on the devolution of power to municipalities, strengthening their capacity to address the country's socio-economic disparities and respond to local needs, particularly those of the young people.*

25 July watershed: A divisive moment

Youth, again, had taken to social media to call on people to gather for nationwide demonstrations on 25 July to ask for radical change, angry at the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic coupled with the worsening economy, and no sign of the country moving out of the suffocating multi-level crisis. The High Council for Youth issued a statement on 17 July calling for protests under the banner "Go out, take your homeland back!"

Two months after the July events, ideological sympathy as well as hostility vis-à-vis Saied's actions emerged more noticeably. Between September and October 2021, growing numbers of Tunisians took to the streets; some to show their allegiance to the president and others to oppose his power grab as he empowered himself to rule by decree, after he issued Decree 117 on 22 September 2021, effectively suspending most of the 2014 Constitution.

In a series of Sunday rallies in central Tunis, civil society activists and citizens came to the fore in their hundreds and thousands. Young people were actively engaged in the weeks that followed Decree 117 through their participation in the protest actions, raising awareness among their peers or making statements on social media.

The president's decisions have divided the Tunisian population down the middle between those celebrating the man who is seeking to save the country from a triple economic, political and health crisis, and others accusing him of violating the constitution and warning of a threat to democracy.

No turning back: A need for radical change

The young Tunisians who hailed the July events view the presidential abrupt initiative as something "legitimate" and "necessary" because it came in response to the people's will to *address the ongoing political paralysis. For* Manel Ben Ammar, a 26-year-old university student from Kairouan who did awareness campaigning in favour of Saied's actions, Tunisian democracy only started after 25 July as people's concerns were heard.[1]

Similarly, Khalil Abbas, 33, a researcher in sociology and long-standing civil society activist from Jebiniana, in the Sfax governorate, who lives in Tunis, believes that the 25 July steps reflected what the majority of the population demanded amidst a wave of popular outrage that had led to nationwide protests.[2]

Like many of their peers, both Manel and Khalil want to see an overhaul of the country's political system because it has failed Tunisians for 10 years with political parties nurturing a "partisan logic" centred on garnering votes rather than on tackling issues of national concern once they were in positions of authority. "The political class and the system that has governed us in the past decade are what generated all the problems we live in today", Abbas decried.

The anti-system sentiment, specifically the hostility toward political parties, is a critique that has become increasingly popular *among Tunisian youth*, paralleling

the president's well-known opposition to a party-based system. Surveys show that just 9% of the population trust political parties and only 15% trust the parliament. This rate is even lower among the youth; 69% of young people affirm that they do not trust political parties.

Young demonstrators, to whom the president owes his popularity, demanded *on 25 July* the dissolution of the legislative assembly *and* violently attacked the regional offices of the Islamist Ennahdha party, the biggest political force in the now-suspended parliament. They blamed the ruling parties for the catastrophic situation of the country.

Adding to that, *the chaotic debates in the assembly with regular political wrangling between the hardliner El Karama coalition and* Free Destourian Party's head *Abir Moussi diminished* the value of parliamentary democracy among the young population.

The parliament had turned into a battlefield with disputes and physical attacks escalating in the recent period. An elected body that should represent citizens has set a bad example, which justified the freeze in the views of many young supporters of the 25 July.

Houssem Jbeli, 28, a freelance interpreter and translator from *Béja, thinks it was necessary that a leader steps in as the parliametn was too fragmented, ill-functioning to continue to exist.*[3]

According to Khaoula Sliti, 26, a dentist and activist from Sidi Hassine who lives in Tunis, the pre-existing situation was "unbearable", requiring strong intervention.[4]

Mohamed Slemia, 30, director of Arabesques publishing house, who is involved in several grassroots associations in his working-class district of *Ettadhamen*, on the outskirts of *Tunis, embraces the necessity to change the political system radically.*[5] *After coming out on the streets on 25 July, he joined the pro-*Saied protests and *has been active on social media and in discussions with other youth. In his opinion, the last 10 years brought no tangible changes and the status quo remained, with corrupted politicians "buying" seats in parliament. "Kais Saied cut this trend", he said, "we have regained some hope that we had lost after 2011. This is what matters".*

Safa Ghabi, 24, a law student and former member of the leftist-affiliated General Union of *Tunisian Students* (*UGET*) from Kairouan, believes Saied's sudden move in July was justified by the absence of a strong state and inaction by parties.[6] "We don't trust public institutions, and political parties have done nothing", Ghabi said while making reference to the aggravated socio-economic situation, deteriorating public services, and the unprecedented public health *emergency* Tunisia was confronted with until last summer, especially in the Kairouan region. The law student participated in youth actions in support of the president's decisions on 25 July. She considers MPs and politicians the main ones responsible for the *economic*, *social* and political *collapse*, which, in her views, legitimises keeping the parliament frozen.

Stopping one-man rule: A return to democracy

Tunisian youth who, instead, opposed the president's power grab claim that Saied acted outside the constitutional frame with his move to freeze the parliament and the almost entire suspension of the constitution. They also raise fears over the "new order" whereby the head of state is holding a near-absolute *power monopoly to the detriment of* the parliament's authority.

Aziza Hichri, 34, councillor at the municipality of Kairouan and member of a community-based movement named "Citizens against the Coup", deems the decisions taken by Saied since July "illegal" and not justified because suddenly halting parliamentary work and having the assembly building sealed off by army units is "not acceptable".[7]

Mariem Ben Ali is a 29-year-old civil society activist in Kairouan and project coordinator at Tunisian NGO "We Start" whose mission is to improve the situation of vulnerable youth through civic engagement and socio-economic integration. She opposes the president's actions and rejects the concentration of power in his hands as a return to a one-man rule.[8]

Saber Selmi, 36, a qualified electrician working privately from *Foussana, who was previously involved in the political education institution Rosa Luxemburg*

Foundation, pointed out that there is no real control envisaged over the president's power whilst the parliament has a minor place in it.[9] In Selmi's opinion, such a system would cause a power imbalance leading to paralysis at regional and municipal levels, similar to that experienced within parliament.

Some of the young people who are said to be against the measures adopted by Saied are afraid that their country risks an authoritarian drift and that freedoms are being rolled back altogether.

Municipal deputy Hichri alluded to the use of military courts to try civilians and instances of prosecution for criticism of the president on social media. Last November, a military court charged blogger Salim Jebali with insulting the president after he published posts on his Facebook page criticising the performance of the presidency and its high officials. In July 2021, independent MP Yassine Ayari was also tried in a military court for defaming Saied. He is known for criticising Tunisia's army and government and for his investigations into corruption.

Thameur Aouini, 23, member of right-oriented General *Tunisian* Union of Students (*UGTE),*[10] *from Fouchana* in the Ben Arous governorate, south of Tunis, slammed some of the rights violations observed in the early phase that followed Saied's power seizure, such as the house arrest orders and the practice of trying civilians in military courts.[10] "For a good part of our youth, we have learnt how to live free, then 10 years later I'm in a situation where I feel that I'm going to be deprived of this freedom", Aouini said. He has mobilised against the 25 July measures from the very next day by sharing critical posts and calling on people to protest.

Ambivalent about what's to come

Many expressed uncertainty about what the head of state's overall policy strategy may be, whether that is changing the system or how he is going to exit the crisis.

Civil society activist Ben Ali said that she feels uneasy about Saied's lack of *clear vision and* "mysterious" communication.

Ahlem Sayeh, 23 years old, a Kairouan-based student and active member of the

Youth Economic Chamber of Tunisia, similarly pointed to the ambiguity in Saied's discourse and what his plans could be for the future.[11] She was among the millions of young Tunisians who voted for Kais Saied in the 2019 presidential polls, although she is firmly against his decisions today.

Although supportive of the president's actions taken since July, Jbeli *has reservations with regards to the country's future direction considering Saied's "unpredictable" modus operandi as well his unclear strategy to get Tunisia out of its impasse in the upcoming months.*

Also, Slemia, despite backing *the post-25 July course of action*, admitted that the president has given little detail about his broader vision.

Young Tunisians who have been disenfranchised by policies towards them led the 2011 revolution, with high unemployment, marginalisation and poor living conditions at the root of their uprising then. Today, they are asking for the same social and economic reforms as back then, voicing economic frustration at the broken promises of the post-revolution political class.

Young people disapproving the president's decisions said they do not think the government appointed by Saied can turn around the economy.

Hassaneen Barkaoui, 32 years old, is a substitute teacher of economics and business management in *Foussana in the Kasserine governorate,* and head of the local branch of Humetna, a Tunisian association that works toward strengthening youth participation in civic, social and cultural life. He is not confident that either the president or the new head of the government can handle the economic crisis as none of the two has an economic profile or related experience.[12]

Since he participated in the revolution, Barkaoui has been actively involved in social movements and has always been apolitical. "All I care about is the development of my country and employment", saying that for him the lack of jobs and the poor state of public infrastructure are the country's biggest problems. If the current administration fails to deliver on these two fronts, he warned, the Tunisian people will be ready to rise again. One issue specific to Foussana, he continued, is that there is "no regional authority" responsible for matters of public concern in the town and "the municipality is very weak". That means Humetna

usually goes to the municipal officials to put items on the table that need action.

Faisal Mouelhi, 35, a school supervisor and active member of the civil society in Foussana and co-founder and regional coordinator of Humetna, has low expectations as to the possibility of correcting Tunisia's negative socio-economic indicators and reversing the course under the current government.[13] In his view, the uprisings of 2011 did not lead to the fall of the regime but, instead, has kept remnants of the Ben Ali era in place. "The system has been diverted, not changed, and continues until today. Kais Saied is also part of it", Mouelhi argued, adding that the same system revolted against itself on 25 July as the only one responsible for the country's troubles.

Those young people who are *welcoming Saied's moves put their trust in the president in taking charge of the situation, including the economic dossier.*

Ettadhamen-bred Slemia *maintained that* it is worth taking a risk with Kais Saied after living through a decade of no progress. He *noted that changing the system to a presidential form of government would enable holding one entity responsible for actions taken, and it would help relaunch the economy.*

Issam Barkaoui, 34, a French language teacher in his town *Foussana,* has been practically unemployed since his graduation in early 2011 coinciding with the uprising, in which he took part. "It was a revolution against dictatorship and marginalisation", he observed, "especially for us from Kasserine and other regions that have been long forgotten".[14] Ten years later, his life has seen no positive change and the general situation is worsening. He views the president as someone "who can save the country" though he anticipates other political forces will try to obstruct his work.

Ghabi, a former UGET member, holds some hope that the named government, under Saied's guard, with its selection of competencies will manage to resolve the country's economic troubles. However, as she reminded, Kais Saied or anyone in power is kept under the watch of the national organisations, he is required to respond to the popular demands. "No one has carte blanche, there is always the supervision of the Tunisian people", she argued.

The cabinet led by PM Najla Bouden has been negotiating with the IMF for a $4

billion assistance plan that would allow Tunisia to inject liquidity into the economy. The country's authorities said they are optimistic about securing an agreement by the end of this quarter. The national draft budget announced in December included a planned increase in fuel and electricity prices, a freeze in public sector pay, and the imposition of new taxes ahead of a deal with the IMF.

Some youths criticised the president's working in solo style, deeming it detrimental to Tunisia not just domestically but also externally.

Hassaneen Barkaoui slammed the head of state for working on his own without consulting with the main actors in the society and blamed him for isolating Tunisia on the international stage.

Student activist Sayeh expressed concern about Saied's unilateral decision-making and said that it has the potential to jeopardise diplomatic relations and restrain foreign investment.

Oumaima Sghaini, 21, another UGTE member *from Fouchana*, who was among the organisers of the anti-Saied demonstrations, voiced worries that in the current state key external partners like the EU and the US may stop financing projects, and some of the foreign-funded NGOs operating in the country may shut down.

Some of the young Tunisians who are giving Mr Saied a chance are concerned that opponents from the political establishment may impair the path ahead.

Student Ben Ammar said to be mainly optimistic except if opponents, driven by partisan concerns, block government efforts to tackle priorities like battling corruption and fixing public finances.

For Sliti, the main problem lies with the old political class, currently side-lined, who may be pondering on "restoring the system" or regaining its privileges through a comeback, with the effect of disrupting the process that was initiated on 25 July.

Fed up with mismanagement, waiting to see results

Many young citizens have grown fed up with the previous government's mishandling of the multiple crises and systemic graft. Since his 2019 presidential campaign, Kais Saied has used the fight against corruption in his public speeches. After his power grab, the Tunisian leader launched a sweeping anti-corruption crackdown pledging to combat corrupt politicians, businessmen and judicial officials. In November, President Saied sacked a few governors across the country in a high-profile corruption case. In early January, a court in Tunis announced the prosecution of 19 high-profile political officials for alleged electoral irregularities

Left behind by their political elite and its perceived corruption, the young hope the president will succeed *in fighting corruption as promised, although some have reservations about the outcome of his mission.*

Jbleli expects he will run into huge hurdles while waging his anti-corruption war. "In 2011 we didn't bring down the old system entirely, it's still here, and corruption is rampant and deeply rooted nationwide. It's not something that Kais Saied can change overnight", the translator noted.

Mouelhi doubts the president will effectively put a stop to the country's corrupt system of governance and retrieve billions of dollars of stolen money from corrupt, self-serving businesspeople and officials.

Following his 25 July intervention, Saied proposed a settlement plan to retrieve 13.5 billion dinars ($4.8 billion) of public money. Through penal reconciliation, businessmen who stole money through unpaid taxes and fraud could either face jail time or return the money via non-profit investments (i.e. hospitals, schools and infrastructure in deprived areas).

Conclusion

After more than two years since Kais Saied's victory in the elections, people are waiting for the promised change in combating corruption and bringing social justice and development to the country's marginalised interior. Chronic problems like a collapsing economy, rising youth unemployment and declining living standards have stayed, and have been compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. Political tensions remain, hindering effective governance and impacting the

government's ability to deliver on socio-economic development.

A lot of young Tunisians continue to rally behind Saied, seeing his election as a continuum in the long process towards change initiated during the revolution.

Yet, others are growing disappointed with the president's performance, and keep vigilant regarding the implementation of his agenda. They see a threat from political parties in blocking his efforts and restoring the balance of forces to perpetuate the current political system, given the establishment's tough resistance to change.

As an outsider, President Saied does not have a political party nor sufficient leverage, which weakens his ability to transform the system from within and the government's ability to fulfil the promises made to the people.

But regardless of what the future holds for the country in Saied's new system, Tunisian youth have proved, like in 2011, that they want real change and can spearhead grassroots engagement to push for it.

Endnotes

1. Interview with Manel Ben Ammar, Kairouan, 12 October 2021
2. Interview with Khalil Abbas, Tunis, 29 October 2021
3. Interview with Houssem Jbeli, Kairouan, 12 October 2021
4. Interview with Khaoula Sliti, Tunis, 29 October 2021
5. Interview with Mohamed Slemia, Tunis, 14 October 2021
6. Interview with Safa Ghabi, Kairouan, 12 October 2021
7. Interview with Aziza Hichri, 17 October 2021
8. Interview with Mariem Ben Ali, 13 October 2021
9. Interview with Saber Selmi, Foussana, 11 October 2021
10. Interview with Thameur Aouini, Tunis, 22 October 2021
11. Interview with Ahlem Sayeh, 14 October 2021
12. Interview with Hassaneen Barkaoui, Foussana, 11 October 2021
13. Interview with Faisal Mouelhi, Foussana, 11 October 2021
14. Interview with Issam Barkaoui, Foussana, 11 October 2021

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About the author



Alessandra Bajec

Alessandra Bajec is a freelance journalist specializing in the Middle East and North Africa. Between 2010 and 2011, she lived in Palestine. She was based in Cairo between 2013 and 2017, and she is now in Tunis. Her articles have appeared in Middle East Eye, The New Arab, TRT World and rt.com among others.

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contact@arab-reform.net

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