

Tunisia's president launched a political crisis. Is it a coup?

Sunday's move started a fight for public approval and control of government institutions

By Nicholas J. Lotito

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An escalating political crisis is now pushing Tunisia's democracy to the brink. On Sunday, President Kais Saied fired the prime minister and suspended parliament, moves his critics have called a "coup."

Saied's decision is without precedent in Tunisia, the lone sustained democracy to have emerged from the Arab Spring. What happened Sunday is a major escalation in the long series of crises that have characterized the country's post-revolutionary politics. With Tunisia's health system collapsing under a tide of coronavirus infections, the economy in free fall and parliamentary blocs locked in stalemate, Saied invoked Article 80 of the constitution to claim unchecked executive authority for at least 30 days.

Prominent Tunisian legal scholar Yadh Ben Achour called the move "a coup in the fullest sense of the word." But without a sitting constitutional court, opponents have no legal recourse to challenge Saied's decision.

What does political science tell us? Legal or not, Saied's actions don't constitute a coup d'état, because they neither target the executive, Saied himself, nor threaten violence. Instead, these moves seem closer to the concept of a self-coup or autogolpe — when a sitting leader suspends the legislature and rules by decree, to retain power. By the standards of Latin American self-coups, Saied's actions so far have been limited.

It's a fight for control of government

Whatever it is called, this is shaping up to be a political fight for public approval and control of government institutions, a fight that Saied is likely to win. Saied appears to have the institutional support of the country's security forces and military, which reportedly stopped Rachid Ghannouchi, president of the parliament, from entering the building on Sunday. And even as protesters gathered in front of parliament to decry what they see as a worrying return to authoritarianism, jubilant supporters thronged the main boulevard of the capital, celebrating a victory over the corruption and incompetence of Tunisia's political class.

Ennahda, a moderate Islamist party, holds the largest share of seats in the now-suspended parliament. Many secularists fervently oppose the group, which they accuse of infiltrating government institutions and inciting acts of terrorism. Some see parallels to the controversial rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, which held power in Egypt until a military coup in 2013.

Saied's regional allies, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, were quick to praise Saied's acts as the latest salvo in the war on political Islam. Yet Tunisia's challenges are also beginning to resemble the economic and health disasters fueling mass outrage in Iraq and in Lebanon.

Saied himself came into office in 2019 on the strength of support from Tunisians disaffected with the existing political system. Now, Saied is again drawing on populist themes, framing his plans to “save Tunisia” as a response to the popular will. For Saied’s critics, Sunday’s actions confirmed their worst suspicions about the president’s authoritarian leanings.

What about Tunisia’s military?

Unlike Egypt’s 2013 coup — which removed another Islamist party from power and abruptly ended the country’s post-Arab Spring democratization — Tunisia’s military is unlikely to play a leading role in the Tunisian crisis.

Even as protracted crises have pushed public trust in political institutions to new lows, the army has remained popular. Public trust in the military can foster stability, but it comes with a risk of politicization. Many Tunisians, especially anti-system voters most supportive of Saied’s outsider presidency, now support an enhanced role for the military in politics.

Yet Tunisian soldiers have long shied away from an overtly political role, as my research explains. Even in the power vacuum of 2011, amid sporadic calls from some Tunisians for the army to take power, soldiers followed the lead of civilian leaders. Tunisians can probably count on their military not to launch a coup of their own.

But there’s a flip side to the military’s neutrality — Tunisia’s army also is unlikely to challenge Saied’s assertion of ever greater presidential powers. By carrying out ostensibly nonpolitical orders to defend public sites like the parliament building from unauthorized intrusions, Tunisia’s military effectively affirmed the president’s capture of the legislative branch.

Similarly, Saied has asserted his control of the country’s security forces. In addition to barring entry to the parliament, police on Monday shut down the Tunis office of Al-Jazeera, a news channel the government sees as favoring Ennahda, and enforced an extended curfew and ban on public assembly. Saied’s control of the security forces may now become a potent advantage as he tests the limits of his powers, sidelining political opponents and pushing for changes to political and even constitutional frameworks of government.

What happens to Tunisia’s democracy?

Tunisian democracy relied on a shared commitment to replace the traditional strongman presidencies of Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali with a pluralistic political sphere, with power shared between the executive and legislative branches. But Saied’s position as an “outsider” president, campaigning on a populist platform targeting the political elite, complicates the picture.

Many of Tunisia’s political parties, especially those tied to former opponents of the Ben Ali regime, oppose Saied’s decision. Yet newer parties, including those with alleged ties to the Ben Ali regime, have expressed their official support. And nongovernmental organizations like the UGTT and LTDH — which received a Nobel Peace Prize for helping Tunisia resolve a 2013 political crisis — have said they will work with Saied to broker a path forward.

Coup or not, this is a major crisis for Tunisian democracy. With the public and elected politicians divided and government institutions largely under his control, Saied holds most of the cards. He will choose Tunisia’s next prime minister — the fourth in the past year, and someone who will lack a clear parliamentary majority and popular mandate necessary to push back against the president. The direction Saied chooses to follow, and the limits of Tunisians’ tolerance for a new presidentialism, will have big implications for the future of Tunisia’s democratic experiment and the prospects for Arab democracy.

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