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RETURNING TUNISIA TO AUTOCRACY CARRIES A COST

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On October 6, Tunisian president Kais Saied won a second term with the highest abstention rate since the fall of Ben Ali. The hopes born of the Revolution of Dignity of 2011 have vanished into the quick sands of history as the country reverts to its traditional autocratic norm. Tunisia has embarked in a risky journey to an economic and political cliff-edge.

814

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"Fewer Tunisians turned out to vote in the presidential election which gave president Kais Saied a second mandate (27.7%) than at any election since the fall of Ben Ali in January 2011. The 89% of voters who endorsed him may well confirm the majority view of those Tunisians who cast a ballot but in the world of modern-day Tunisia, nothing is what it looks like: growing repression takes the form of preventing candidates to stand, sending them to jail under false pretences, denying them the "signatures" they are legally required to gather, etc. A recent Arab Barometer analysis suggested Saied retained broad popular support. It is born of quiet despair at a corporatist system where insiders hold true economic and political power; where powerful businessmen languish in prison awaiting trial for alleged corruption; where the once powerful UGTT has been emasculated and a relatively free media gagged.

Tunisia's accelerating journey to economic cliff-edge has been well documented by Hachemi Alaya, the editor of the *Ecoweek* newsletter who points to two statistics in the 2025 budget, which has just been put to parliament. Domestic borrowing is set to jump from 11,7 bn Tunisian Dinars (TD) this year to TD21,9 bn in 2025 (in other words the Central Bank will print money) while recourse to foreign borrowing will be cut from TD16.5bn to TD6,1 bn. Foreign credit markets are closing because Kais Saied refuses to broker an agreement with the IMF. This high-risk strategy could tip the economy over the cliff-edge.

The same could be said of the country's journey to political cliff-edge. Reverting to autocracy started well before Saied's first election to the presidency in 2019 and was characterised by several oversights: the failure to reform the security apparatus and hold it to democratic account; the unwillingness of successive government to reform a corporatist state which favoured insiders and rents; the failure to reform the judicial and tax systems; and a denial of the growing economic and social fracture between a relatively prosperous coast and a poor hinterland which exports its water, natural resources (phosphates and oil) and man power to the city hubs of the coast – Tunis, Sousse and Sfax.

A recent internal report drafted by the European Union's diplomatic service (EEAS) details "a clear deterioration of the political climate" and a "shrinking civic space" under Kais Saied. The EU fears the credibility of its foreign policy is at stake as it seeks to weigh growing concerns about the crushing of dissent in Tunisia and the 2023 EU-Tunisia Integration Pact aimed at stopping people from reaching Europe's shores from that country.

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The EU faced comparable situations when it signed agreements, built upon similar lines, with Turkey and Egypt. Who might these countries be? Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE which provide over and under the counter financial aid to the north African country, China and Russia maybe.

The dilemma in Brussels is the result of the EU's propensity to mix defending its own interests and promoting democracy, which it is considered part of its "chore values". That mixing has led to endless confusion about what EU foreign policy really is, not least in southern rim Mediterranean countries which are ever less inclined to be "dictated to" as they see it by a Western world which it no longer respects. The EU has long boasted of its Neighbourhood Policy and the benefits it is supposed to bring to countries on both shores of the Mediterranean. A minority of economists such as Alfred Tovias and Gilbert Achcar have pointed out, ever since the inception of the Barcelona Process in 1995 that the benefits of the Neighbourhood Policy to southern rim countries were much less than the inflated EU vocabulary used to promote them. But, until recently the ruling doxa took little notice of such criticism nor did it accept that free trade agreements which do not include a much freer movement of people than the EU ever allowed for which a country such as Tunisia was not simply hypocritical, but doomed to fail.

However tired they feel about the constant posturing, as they see it, of the Tunisian president and his disregard for the rule of law, nobody expects any change after this recent presidential election. The hopes born of the Revolution of Dignity of 2011 have vanished into the quick sands of history as the country reverts to its traditional autocratic norm.

Saied's fight against corruption is genuine but increasingly akin to Don Quijote tilting at windmills. Leading businessmen are under lock and key but never brought to trial. The fair trial of one of two prisoners such as Kamel El-Taief might show how leading private groups have built their wealth on privileged access to political power and crony capitalism, which the president claims to hate. But such trials look unlikely to ever occur. Fear stalks the board room of Tunis and Sfax – private investors be they domestic or foreign are on strike. A country which fails to invest in its economy eventually runs into the ground.

The EU is paying the price of a misunderstanding that goes back to before 2011 when a violent revolt forced the ruling class to get rid of Ben Ali in order to save their privileges. The Tunisian security forces forced Ben Ali to flee. In 2021 they backed Kais Saied. Tunisia was never the model economic boy beloved of the IMF and Brussels before 2011 nor the only Arab democracy they pretended after that date. In Tunisia as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the *mukhabarat* – secret police - hold the reins of power. Tunisia has reverted to autocracy, assuming it ever really left it.