

Tunisia Is Holding an Election—But Will Voters Show Up?

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Sep 27, 2024

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Brief Analysis

To counter President Saied’s electoral manipulation and increased repression, Washington should work more closely with its contacts in Tunisia’s military, civil society, and European partner governments.

On October 6, Tunisia will hold its third presidential election since a revolution forced the removal of autocrat Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. Although the country was the subject of much fanfare during its brief democratic transition the following decade, President Kais Saied has now rewritten the election rules to secure another win and eliminated virtually all competition. He has also increased his use of repressive tactics, suggesting he lacks confidence in his ability to win convincingly. His extreme behavior portends further crackdowns and instability during an inevitable second term, potentially signaling a new phase in Tunisia’s democratic backsliding.

Descent Into Political Theater

Saied’s first win five years ago was deemed free and fair by international observers, but few observers [consider Tunisia a full democracy \(https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2023\)](https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2023) today. In 2021, facing mass social unrest partway through his first term, Saied abruptly dismissed the prime minister, suspended parliament, and bypassed most of the constitution so that he could rule by decree. In July 2022, the country adopted a new constitution in a referendum marred by strikingly low turnout (see below), significantly enhancing the president’s powers and weakening various checks and balances. Since then, Saied has used [legal manipulation and other tactics \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisia-timeline-key-developments-and-us-responses-july-2022\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisia-timeline-key-developments-and-us-responses-july-2022) to further restrict individual liberties, silence opponents, and create a climate of fear.

In contrast to previous election cycles, parliament did not issue an electoral code for the current campaign. Instead, the Independent High Authority for Elections—known by its French acronym ISIE and overseen by Saied—issued last-minute decrees specifying the conditions for candidacy and the electoral calendar. For [some \(https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=903859818450338&set=pcb.903859905116996&paipv=0&eav=AfaJTNcfoVI_r48oPbHSW9tYNBWEExUcp_6fn01kcpD_TpR764P-BEjzNwIPJOnT8YFU&_rdr\)](https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=903859818450338&set=pcb.903859905116996&paipv=0&eav=AfaJTNcfoVI_r48oPbHSW9tYNBWEExUcp_6fn01kcpD_TpR764P-BEjzNwIPJOnT8YFU&_rdr), this represented overreach by the ISIE, a circumvention of parliament’s authority, and a deliberate lack of government transparency.

Due to the ISIE’s strict criteria, only 17 out of a [reported 100-plus \(https://theArabweekly.com/tunisian-presidential-hopefuls-start-submitting-candidacies-challenge-saied\)](https://theArabweekly.com/tunisian-presidential-hopefuls-start-submitting-candidacies-challenge-saied) expected candidates even submitted a dossier to the commission. The new rules raised the minimum age for candidacy, barred dual nationals from running, and required applicants to submit an official copy of their criminal record known as the B3—a document notoriously difficult to obtain. At least twelve other would-be candidates have been [arrested](#)

<https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/09/tunisia-presidential-election-saied-candidates-jailed?lang=en>) on charges of criticizing or conspiring against the state, or for violating the electoral law requiring voter sponsorships.

Saied's "Mad King" Behavior

At the close of the nomination period, the ISIE announced a final list of three candidates: Saied, Ayachi Zammel of the Azimoun Party, and Zouheir Maghzaoui of the People's Movement. Three other candidates successfully appealed to the Administrative Court after the ISIE rejected their applications: Abdellatif Mekki (formerly of the Islamist Ennahda party), Mondher Znaidi (a former Ben Ali minister), and Imed Daimi (of the center-left Congress for the Republic Party). Yet the ISIE refused to accept the court's decision, calling for the recusal of certain judges and effectively declaring itself the final arbiter on candidates' eligibility—a move that spurred widespread criticism from [civil society](https://kapitalis.com/anbaa-tounes/2024/08/31/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86/#google_vignette) (https://kapitalis.com/anbaa-tounes/2024/08/31/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86/#google_vignette), political parties, and [members of the legal community](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisia-law-professors-warn-presidential-election-legitimacy-risk-2024-09-05/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisia-law-professors-warn-presidential-election-legitimacy-risk-2024-09-05/>). Meanwhile, Zammel was arrested on charges of falsifying his sponsorships and sentenced to twenty months in prison, making the race a two-man show.

Even if Mekki, Znaidi, Daimi, and other rejected candidates challenge the results following the election, they will have little legal recourse given Saied's subordination of the judiciary and seemingly growing paranoia. In addition to escalating his repressive tactics in recent months, the president has systematically removed the rational voices surrounding him, then fired his prime minister, reshuffled the cabinet, and [replaced](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240910-saied-appoints-new-governors-across-tunisia-weeks-before-presidential-election/) (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240910-saied-appoints-new-governors-across-tunisia-weeks-before-presidential-election/>) all the country's regional governors.

Will People Vote?

Tunisia has held three elections under Saied, each with abysmal voter turnout. In July 2022, less than one-third of voters showed up to approve a new constitution that undermined the 2014 charter and consolidated Saied's power. In December 2022, only 11 percent voted for new members of parliament after Saied dismissed the previous legislature—one of the lowest turnout totals ever seen in a national election anywhere in the world. This dubious feat was repeated the following December when Saied ordered elections for a new second house of parliament.

Despite actively boycotting previous contests under Saied, Tunisia's political opposition has not yet announced a formal boycott of next month's election. Yet with voters lacking a real choice and preoccupied with rising unemployment and inflation, the people are unlikely to turn out in sufficient numbers to give Saied a strong mandate for his inevitable second term.

Policy Implications

The United States has invested billions in Tunisia's democratic transition and is increasingly concerned about stability there and elsewhere in North Africa. U.S. policymakers have also maintained close contacts with elements of the Tunisian government and military who can help urge Saied to turn away from his most problematic policies. Accordingly, even if voter turnout increases next month, Washington should avoid granting undue legitimacy to this fraudulent election by issuing congratulatory statements or praising Tunisia's democratic progress. Instead, it should privately and publicly emphasize the negative effects of repression on Tunisia's citizenry and foreign relations.

In the longer term, officials can take various steps to help restore Tunisia's economic growth, stability, and security. First, the U.S. government and relevant NGOs should continue cultivating working-level contacts within Tunisia's government and civil society. Despite the high turnover and backsliding under Saied, the country's bureaucracy has largely managed to keep functioning, and many civil society organizations have continued to serve as important watchdogs, pressing for human rights and a return to democracy. The latter groups will need even more financial and rhetorical support in the current environment. As Saied increasingly targets Tunisian organizations that receive U.S. funding, Washington should use its leverage to keep the civic space from shrinking any further.

Second, the United States can take steps that help restore the Tunisian people's trust in their political class. These include working with young activists and mid-level bureaucrats who can play political roles in the future, recognizing that the current crop of politicians is largely discredited. Education and exchange programs would help as well—many Tunisians desire them as a means of expanding their access to English-language education and developing skills that will help them enter the workforce.

Third, the United States has a deep relationship with Tunisia's military, which remains the country's most trusted actor. Congress should therefore resist the inclination to cut funding to Tunis. Instead, it should continue to push for training that not only keeps Tunisia and the

broader region safer, but also helps ensure that the military can act as a guardrail if worries of electoral violence come to fruition.

Fourth, the United States should work with the two foreign leaders who have Saied's ear: Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune and Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni. Washington's relationship with Algeria has been growing over the past several years, and the country is increasingly interested in people-to-people cooperation with Americans. U.S. officials should leverage this warming, partly to increase their outreach to the Algerian and Tunisian people, but also to quietly encourage Algiers to use its influence with Saied. In particular, Tebboune could remind the president that preserving stability is crucial, especially at a time of mounting **protests** (<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20240923-tunisians-resume-protests-against-president-ahead-of-october-election>) against him.

For her part, Meloni has become the de facto voice of Europe in Tunisia, leading the negotiation of multiple **assistance packages and migration deals** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/did-eu-bail-out-tunisia-kais-saied>) with Saied. Washington should urge Rome and other European partners to help limit further authoritarian backsliding in Tunis by encouraging Saied to undertake crucial economic reforms. These measures could benefit his country and Europe alike, in part by addressing some of the **root causes of migration** (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/has-west-learned-work-tunisia-211559>) through and from Tunisia.

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