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# Engineered Legitimacy: Tunisia's Presidential Election And Its Aftermath

A Conversation with Abderrazak Kilani,  
Former President of the Tunisian Bar Association and  
Former Tunisian Ambassador to the United Nations

By Sara Mohamed

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On October 6, President Kais Saied was reelected to a second term as president of Tunisia in the country's first presidential election since Saied's sweeping power grab in July 2021 when he dissolved the parliament and seized extensive executive powers. The election was seen as a crucial test for Tunisia's democracy, amid widespread concerns about the erosion of political freedoms and democratic institutions under Saied's rule.

Abderrazak Kilani is a former Ambassador of Tunisia to the United Nations and a prominent political figure. He chaired the National Bar of Lawyers during the 2010 Tunisian Revolution and served as Deputy Prime Minister for Relations with the Constituent Assembly in 2012. He has been closely monitoring the elections for the Middle East Democracy Center (MEDDC), offering invaluable insights into the country's evolving political landscape. Through [MEDDC's Tunisian Presidential Election Monitor](#), Kilani has documented and analyzed violations surrounding the election, highlighting significant obstacles to holding a free and fair vote.

In a conversation with MEDDC's Sara Mohamed, Kilani discusses his analysis of the Tunisian election, including electoral violations, efforts by members of parliament to consolidate Saied's power, and the aftermath of the vote. They also explore the challenges facing opposition parties and the potential for uniting forces to challenge Saied's increasingly authoritarian regime.

**MEDC: There were many violations in the lead-up to Tunisia’s presidential election, including arrests and convictions of President Kais Saied’s potential rivals, suppression of press freedom, and the unfair exclusion of candidates. Were there any violations on election day specifically, or significant abuses that, in your view, did not receive sufficient media coverage?**

**Abderrazak Kilani:** State television carried Saied’s propaganda throughout polling day, in violation of the law. Representatives of Saied were actively attempting to influence voter choices in several polling stations. They used electronic tablets to collect voter opinions, which raised concerns that this could manipulate voter behavior and potentially sway the election outcome.

Given the absence of observers at most polling stations, it could not be verified that the head of each station or their deputy posted a tally sheet for the station or placed a copy of it in the ballot box, as required under Article 140 of the electoral law; failure to do so entails a prison sentence, under Article 164 of the electoral law.

On top of that, state television—in partnership with a private polling organization whose owner is a well-known regime sycophant—published a purported [poll](#) of the election results, also in violation of the law, for the purpose of preparing the public to accept the results of the election before the Electoral Commission had announced them.

It was not actually an electoral race, but rather a show of strength using the state apparatus, and a distortion of the law. The amendment that strips the judiciary’s authority is nothing but a farce. Moreover, the Election Commission’s refusal to allow observers and monitors in most polling stations, whether representing civil society or candidates, is further evidence that the elections were neither free nor fair.

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**Late in the campaign season, the Tunisian parliament passed a new law aimed at removing any real oversight over the Tunisian electoral commission, which is under Saied’s total control. Are there any other legislative efforts underway to consolidate the president’s power?**

According to Saied’s 2022 constitution, members of parliament are simply “employees”, with no real authority. Accordingly, they do whatever Saied tells them, under duress—including the threat of being thrown in jail—while Saied holds absolute power.

It is true that the question of whether Saied can run again has been discussed. His supporters have demanded this, arguing that the passing of a new constitution means that the first term of his presidency is not taken into count [in calculating term limits]. Third-placed candidate Zouhair Maghzaoui has called on Saied to clarify this issue and announce that he will serve his last term in government in accordance with the constitution and the law, to “settle the debate on this issue once and for all.”

**Saied has long resorted to severe repression of freedoms of expression, association, and the press to deepen his authoritarian grip. How has he targeted journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens, before and since the elections? Have you noticed any new trends?**

The repression against activists has not eased, but rather continued and worsened. An example is the [sentence](#) against lawyer and former Minister of Justice Noureddine Bhiri, on charges of “committing an attack intended to alter the form of the state.” The criminal chamber of the Court of First Instance issued a 10-year prison sentence against him on October 19, on the basis of a blog post that the public prosecution failed to prove he had written. This sentence, [according](#) to Bhiri’s defense team, “represents the continuation of an unprecedented judicial campaign of trampling on procedures, violating the law and failing to observe the most basic formalities of a fair trial.”

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Another example is that of the candidate who came second in the election, Ayachi Zammel. He is in prison and undergoing prosecution on at least 37 cases, which have already resulted in sentences totaling 36 years. Zammel is being harassed because he used the slogan “Let’s Turn the Page” when he announced his candidacy, then defended his right to run and refused to withdraw from the race. He was quickly arrested.

Another person who was arrested is lawyer and commentator Sonia Dahmani, who is serving an eight-month prison sentence for comments she made on the radio. In October, the Tunis Court of First Instance [sentenced](#) her to two years in prison for criticizing the authorities over the living conditions in Tunisia, and issues of migration and racism. She is facing three other similar trials.

The campaign against the opposition continues. On November 4, well-known journalist Mohamed Boughaleb was transferred from his cell in the Mornaguia civilian prison to another cell called “El-Garraga” (the dredger), which is barely fit for human habitation: a cramped space with dilapidated infrastructure, which doesn’t respect the basic rights of prisoners. Boughaleb, who has been detained since March 2024, is suffering from chronic illnesses and needs intensive medical care.

The head of the post-2011 Truth and Dignity Commission, Sihem Bensedrine, has also been [imprisoned](#) since August 2024 on trumped-up charges, despite her immunity under the Transitional Justice Law. She is known for her incorruptibility and has devoted herself to defending just causes since her youth.

These examples show that the machine of repression under Saied’s rule continues to target all segments of Tunisian society. Political opponents of various ideological orientations have been thrown into prison. Now comes the turn of businessmen—Saied has [vowed](#) to “launch a war on corruption.” This threatens to

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destabilize the economy, and will result in companies closing down, mass layoffs, and growing poverty and unemployment.

In addition, despite attempts during the democratic transition period to reconcile the Tunisian security agencies with the public, Saied, as part of his steps to consolidate his power, has used those agencies as a tool to repress opponents and prosecute activists and journalists. This has created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation that has eroded trust between the government and Tunisian citizens. Many feel that instead of protecting them, the security forces have become an instrument of intimidation. It has become difficult for Tunisian civil society to operate freely, an alarming indicator of Tunisia's further slide towards repression and rolling back of freedoms.

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Someone commented on Saied's inauguration speech: "No program, no accomplishment, no realistic indicators, no clear vision . . . only threats and intimidating rhetoric." There are no indications of any change.

**We saw that some political parties decided to boycott the elections, while others decided to take part and put up their own candidates. This is an example of the divisions among those opposed to Saied's authoritarian rule. How can Tunisian political parties opposed to Saied's rule unite to challenge him? Is this possible?**

The various parts of the opposition agree on their opposition to Saied, but they are not united with each other. They have remained divided despite the repression, harassment, and imprisonment of most of their leaders, a phenomenon that deserves more examination.

Saied certainly uses this to his advantage and exploits these divisions to tighten his grip on every part of the state. The opposition remains shackled by its ideologies and intellectual differences, which rule out any unity or even rapprochement, despite attempts by various parties to find common ground, coordinate amongst themselves and put the national interest ahead of individual or partisan interests.

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In any case, rejecting any rapprochement, as some members of the opposition have done, is unwise, and only serves the interests of the dictatorship. Over time, I believe that unity is inevitable, because the coming repression will unite them all, whether they like it or not.

## Based on everything you have told us, what do these undemocratic elections reveal about Saied's governance and Tunisian institutions in the future?

I can make four observations about how the country is being run under Saied.

1. **Government by the incompetent, with no project or program.** Despite his lack of competence in government (he taught law for 30 years), he insists on implementing his vision in every area. He has a superficial and naive understanding of complex issues such as fiscal balances and how to drive economic growth. Nor does he understand how to manage public affairs or choose his advisors. He has appointed four heads of government since 2020, and has dismissed dozens of ministers, directors-general and governors. This explains the paralysis of the administration and the economy and why both are in such a dilapidated state. In general, Saied equates loyalty to himself with competence, never admits failure, and sees any opinion contrary to his own as a conspiracy.
2. **Hate speech and violence.** In almost every one of his speeches, Saied curses and insults his opponents, accusing them of being traitors, collaborators, and mercenaries, or describing them as germs and tumors that must be exterminated. But he goes further: His rhetoric also uses content and terminology that incites hatred, undermines peace, and justifies violence. The deterioration of the situation and the rise of hate speech have been accompanied by growing racism against people arriving from the Sahel region to Tunisia.
3. **Rampant injustice.** Tunisia has not experienced this level of injustice in its history, not even during the Ben Ali era. Under Ben Ali, repression affected certain groups, but under Saied, it has extended to everyone. In the course of our work we have discovered fabricated, empty lawsuits based on laughable evidence. Unfortunately, the people targeted in these cases have no access to justice, because judges reach verdicts based on the instructions they receive, under threat of dismissal or even imprisonment, so the circle of injustice widens every day.
4. **Tough living standards.** Tunisians are facing a cost-of-living crisis, a lack of basic materials, a high rate of poverty and unemployment, and few prospects for young people. All this constitutes a groundswell among Tunisians that could pave the way for a popular uprising in the not-too-distant future.

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### The Expert



**ABDERRAZAK KILANI** is a lawyer and former government minister and head of the national bar association. In 2010, during the Tunisian Revolution, he served as the chairman of the National Bar of Lawyers. In 2012, he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister for Relations with the Constituent Assembly under Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali. Since 2013, he has been the Ambassador of Tunisia to the United Nations. On October 20, 2020, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi announced Kilani's appointment as President of the General Authority of Resisters, Martyrs, and Wounded of the Revolution and Terrorist Operations. Follow him on X [@AbderrazakKila1](#).

### The Author

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***THE MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY CENTER (MEDC), formed by a 2024 merger of the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Freedom Initiative, is a U.S.-based nonprofit and nonpartisan advocacy organization that works with the people of the Middle East and North Africa to challenge authoritarian systems, free the unjustly detained, and advocate for U.S. policies that protect human rights and advance a bold vision for democracy.***

*Cover photo:* Tunisian President Kais Saied, took the constitutional oath at the House of People's Representatives in Bardo, and then attended a reception ceremony at the Carthage Palace on October 21, 2024. *Credit:* Tunisia Presidency official Facebook page