

# Neo-Autocratic Leadership in Carthage

What is the similarity between Adolf Hitler and Kais Saied? Well, they both have attributes of autocratic leaders. Autocratic leaders make all important decisions. They are primarily concerned with task accomplishment regardless of the satisfaction of the people. They keep considerable social distance from their followers, and 'motivate' them through punishments instead of rewards. The core essence of such leaders is 'Do as I say because I say so.' It has been a long time since German Sociologist Theodore Adorno (1950) came up with the concept of 'authoritarian personality' and asserted that individuals with such personality dimensions tend to be religiously and politically conservative, hostile toward people, desire power, and resist change. Indeed, recent research shows that autocratic leaders are authoritarians who prefer punishments and discourage their followers' participation in decision-making.

This is exactly what the Tunisian President has been exhibiting in the last months while he tries to grab power and singularize authority against all state bodies such as the parliament and other judicial instruments. What is observed now in Tunisia is more or less similar to the widespread social anxiety that had been occurred in the emergence of Fascism in Italy, Soviet in Russia, and Nazism in Germany. This social anxiety is an accumulation of tensions between Saied, the Parliament, and the rest of Tunisians who yearn for the freedom of speech and prosperity following decades of dictatorship.

## Major Democracy Setback

In 2011, the Arab Spring began in Tunisia when a street vendor was humiliated by a municipal officer and her assistants. The vendor Mohammed Buazizi, who was actually a university graduate, felt underestimated in his own country by an official security person who was supposed to save and secure the lives of Tunisians. The humiliation led to his self-immolation which triggered public anger and sporadic violence across the country. This shook Ben Ali's position and forced him to step down and escape the country. Such a revolution commenced by a young man fired up thousands of citizens in Arab countries to follow Buazizi's footsteps and speak up for their rights to live with dignity and prosperity. Nobody could have imagined that social and economic reforms were right behind speaking up the truth in the face of dictators.

Events continued to develop for a few years until 2014 when the new Constitution came out emphasizing major democratic gains and reforms especially in terms of people's rights and freedoms. Considerably, the Islamic-rooted Ennahda Party played a central role in the newly established government in terms of drafting the new constitution besides the enormous contributions of other political parties. Things were looking better on the Tunisian political scene. The head of the Ennahda party who is also the Speaker of the House of Representatives Rached Ghannouchi stated that "Tunisia is the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring and continues to be, for many Arabs, a source of hope in their pursuit of democracy."

However, this hope faded out when Saied conducted a systematic coup against the Constitution as he sacked the government and called for suspense to the Assembly on July 25, 2021. Such moves are an assault on Tunisian democratic values that have been accumulated over the last decade. Saied claimed that he "could rule by decree during a period of exceptional measures, and promised a dialogue on further changes." The Constitution allows people to protest and demonstrate their freedom of speech against inequalities and human rights violation. It is the president himself that has created those exceptional measures after he sacked Prime Minister Hisham Mechichi and suspended the parliament.

## Unconstitutional Moves

The current Tunisian Constitution is considered unprecedented in the region as it gives people many rights and freedoms that were missing for decades, thanks to the dictatorial consecutive regimes. The new Constitution received an international praise for Tunisians' efforts towards reform concerning rights and freedoms. Unfortunately, these democratic gains that prospered for a few years are being gradually demolished by the current president as he dismissed the government, suspended the Assembly of Representatives, and eventually called for a cancellation of the 2014 Constitution on December 22 2021.

It is true that many demonstrations took place in Tunisia due to social and economic problems. It is also

true that many Tunisians are exhausted of the poor healthcare system in fighting the ongoing pandemic. The effects of Covid-19 are not biased; however, the pandemic gravely affect even strong countries such as the U.S. and many European countries. Since the current Tunisian government did its best possible to take control and minimize the risks of Covid-19, it is unfair to judge and blame the current elected government because of the cumulated years of corruption by previous regimes. So as the Tunisian democracy is now in the hands of an autocracy, there should be a reverse to the previous settings.

The President's moves are unconstitutional and below are just some of the instances where Saied violated the Constitution. For one, Saied did not consult with the Prime Minister, Speaker of the Assembly, and President of Constitutional Court prior to dismissing the Assembly of the Representatives. The President is not allowed to dismiss the correct functioning of the Assembly of the Representatives. Article 80 in the Constitution states that in case of exceptional measures, the president should address them to the people by assuring "a return to the normal functioning of state institutions and services. The Assembly of the Representatives of the People shall be deemed to be in a state of continuous session throughout such a period."

Secondly, inhumane treatment of civilians goes against the Constitution. The state should guarantee "freedom, dignity, justice, and order" and "protects human dignity and physical integrity, and prohibits mental and physical torture. Crimes of torture are not subject to any statute of limitations," state Articles 4 and 23 respectively.

Thirdly, freedom of expression has been violated with the arrests of journalists and the closing of media outlets in an attempt to put down opposing voices. The Audio-Visual Communication Commission's job is to regulate and develop the media sector not to close televisions and radio stations that represent oppositions. Article 127 clearly states that "The Audio-Visual Communication Commission is responsible for the regulation and development of the audio-visual communication sector and ensures freedom of expression and information, and the establishment of a pluralistic media sector that functions with integrity."

Last but not least, the fact that Saied grabbed all powers reflects his dictatorial aspect and desire to control everything with all costs. It has been months since tensions escalated on July 25 2021. The President of the Republic has neither the right to dismiss legislature nor to sack the government. He should first "consult with political parties, coalitions, and parliamentary groups, with the objective of asking the person judged most capable to form a government within a period of no more than one month to do so." In case people fail to grant confidence in a government, the "President of the Republic may dissolve the Assembly of the Representatives of the People and call for new legislative elections to be held within a minimum of 45 days and a maximum of 90 days," as stated in Article 89. Nevertheless, the Tunisian president announced constitutional referendum to take place in July 2022, and general elections in December 2022, which means 17 months after the crisis.

## **Decline in Human Rights**

Upheavals of the Arab Spring inaugurated its first chapter from Tunisia when Buazizi engaged in a self-immolation act; and its domino effects can be seen in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. The Arab Spring began with a human rights violation in Tunisia. Since then, human rights groups at both national and international levels have constantly warned against the trial of civilians in military courts. Such trials have involved street vendors, journalists, lawyers, assembly representatives, and anyone who criticize Saied's measures since July 25 2021. Recent arrests recalled similar trials at Ben Ali era. Although Article 29 of the Constitution states that "No person may be arrested or detained unless apprehended during the commission of a crime or on the basis of a judicial order," recent arrests totally or partially used military means to shut up every opposing voice as demonstrations were violently disseminated in September 2021.

Following the dismissal of the Assembly and stripping the representatives of immunity; awful arrests started to appear with or without reasons. Tunisian lawyer and Ennahda representative El-Beheiry was enforced to disappear in front of his own house while his wife watched him being humiliated by dozens of police officers wearing civilian clothes. Assaults against El-Beheiry and his wife marked a huge decline in human rights that were gained in 2011 in Saied's group's attempt to shut up every mouth who goes against his autocratic stream. The UN Office for High Commissioner for Human Rights calls on Tunisian authorities to either charge or release El-Beheiry who has been suffering from a heart attack since he was

tortured. No information was released since his disappearance until his wife received a notification from the police station to bring his medication. Clearly, El-Beheiry is under arrest without any charge, suffering from Ben Ali's remnants in terms of abduction, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention.

### **What Lies Ahead?**

It seems that we are experiencing a new era of autocratic leadership in Carthage. We do not certainly know how long it will last. However, Tunisians are mature enough to handle this crisis exactly in the same way they gave birth to the Arab Spring in 2011. I think it is time for Saied to lean for wisdom and call for a dialogue to rebuild trust with all Tunisians regardless of their political background; because his violations against the Constitution just recalled the classical dictators' behaviors by whom freedom-seekers are fed up with. One-man rule is not the solution at all. The logic of 'I'm above all of you' and 'Who do you think you are?!' do not work anymore; it will only worsen the situation and widen the gap between leader's unrealistic solutions and followers' natural expectations. Instead, the solutions of political, economic and social problems are in the hands of all Tunisians as a whole nation without marginalizing any valuable contribution in peaceful democratic means.

### **References**

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