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ON MIDDLE EAST
DEMOCRACY

— *Event Transcript* —

Will Tunisia's Democracy Survive?

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PANEL 1 – VIEWS FROM TUNISIA AND THE REGION

Amy Hawthorne [0:12]

Hello, everyone. Welcome to our POMED event today, “Can Tunisia's Democracy Survive?” I'm Amy Hawthorne, Deputy Director for Research, and I'm pleased to be moderating this first panel with three outstanding experts.

This event is certainly very timely. Just yesterday, December 13, President Kaïs Saïed, five months—approximately—after he assumed one-man rule and completely upended the post-2011 political game in Tunisia, he unveiled his roadmap to remake the political system. And this very attenuated roadmap involves “online consultations” with the public about a new constitution with a vote on that new constitution on July 25, 2022, followed by parliamentary elections—new elections for the currently frozen parliament—next December 17. In the meantime, as this process unfolds, it's assumed that President Saïed will continue to rule with basically unchecked power.

I'm very pleased to have three excellent experts with us today to unpack what's happening. First, we have Amine Ghali, who's program director of the Kawakibi Center in Tunis. And I believe that Amine is still trying to join us, he's having some connectivity issues, but Inshallah he'll be with us very soon. We have Amna Guellali, who is deputy regional director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International, also in Tunis. Welcome, Amna.

And last but not least, we have Monica Marks, professor of Middle Eastern politics at New York University Abu Dhabi, in Abu Dhabi. Welcome.

So the format for the next just short of an hour is: I will ask each of our panelists a couple rounds of questions. And then I hope we'll have a few minutes to take questions from the audience. If you'd like to submit a question for that portion of the program, please use either the Q&A function at the bottom of your Zoom screen if you're joining us via Zoom, or you can email your question to communications@pomed.org if you're joining via livestream. Thank you so much. And then after this panel we will turn to brief remarks from U.S. Senator Chris Murphy.

So why don't we jump right in. Amine? Are you able to hear us?

Amine Ghali [3:12]

Yes, I am.

Amy Hawthorne [3:13]

Hello, Amine, it's so good to have you with us [crosstalk].

Amine Ghali

Sorry [inaudible].

Amy Hawthorne

[Crosstalk] Sorry that we can't see you.

Amine Ghali [3:19]

Sorry, yes, I had to move to another area to have a better connection. I'm sorry.

Amy Hawthorne [3:26]

Well, we're so glad to hear you. Thank you so much for being with us today from Tunis. Amine, let's jump right in. Let me ask you, what do you make of this roadmap that President Saïed finally unveiled yesterday? What do you think he really has in mind here? And to what extent does his apparent plan to remake Tunisia's political system put democracy at risk, or perhaps even move the country toward autocracy, or perhaps it will usher in a new period of democratic politics? Let's start off by hearing your thoughts on that. Thank you so much.

Amine Ghali [4:03]

Thank you again for the invitation. And thank you for all the participants and for the interest in the Tunisian transition. We still think it is a transition, with a new chapter, but we are still in transition trying to make our democracy a reality.

Back to your question. At last, after almost five or six months, the president decided to give us a roadmap, despite his refusal on several occasion[s] to use this word and to present a roadmap. Today, we have a calendar of important events to come. This calendar—even though we are somehow happy to have a calendar and avoid this kind of uncertainty we had in the past few

months—we are not satisfied with this calendar. We are not satisfied with some of the events spelled out: We are not sure yet that we want to go for a full reform of the constitution. We are not sure yet about the mechanism of this reform.

But we are also against this very loose timeline. We are, according to the speech—and it's still a speech, it's not written on paper yet—but according to the speech, according to this calendar, we still have one year of very distant events. Every single event he mentioned will take three to four months. Why do we think that this [overall timeline] could be shortened to six, seven months? Not because we are very happy with it, but because we are still not certain that we will go through the sequencing of events. And because the economy is suffering. Instability is the synonym of economic hardship, and Tunisia is very close to the bottom when it comes to the economy. And we do not want this uncertainty to prevail for another one year.

The other part of your question is, where is the president taking us? The president is taking us to a new system, very centered [around the presidency], a very personal idea. What he's deciding or suggesting is not the idea of the people. It has never been discussed. It has never been consulted among different groups. So I don't know if the 10 million or 11 million Tunisians agree with these very new ideas, very uncommon ideas, not only for Tunisia, but I would say even at the level of the planet.

[Saïed's proposed system] is somehow a system between a regular democracy and the direct democracy of [Muammar] Gaddafi in Libya, some form of community-centered democracy. A very weird system. We do not want to reinvent the wheel every single time. There are practices and procedures and best practices from across the globe when it comes to democracy. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, we can follow these steps. So again, yesterday was a different day because the president made a speech outlining his ideas. But as a nation, I don't have any certainty that we are accepting these ideas, and we are seeing already some comments yesterday night, and today. [In the] coming days, politicians, political parties, some will probably know that Tunisia is a political [inaudible]. All of these are not very much welcom[ing] for what the next few days will bring us in terms of this new political orientation.

Amy Hawthorne [8:31]

Thank you, Amine. We could hear most of that from you. You broke up a little bit at points, but we know that joining by Internet is often a challenge during these Zoom days. So let me turn next to Monica. Monica, do you want to add to or react to anything that Amine said about yesterday's announcement? And a particular question for you is: why this very extended attenuated timeline? Why is the president giving like a year for this whole process? What are the risks of that? And then following that, could you tell us your general assessment of how Tunisia's main political forces have reacted to what many are calling Kaïs Saïed's power grab, particularly Ennahda? And have these reactions changed or unfolded differently than you were expecting on July 25, when this whole change started? Thank you so much. Over to you, Monica.

Monica Marks [9:34]

Lovely to be here. Thank you. Amine said a great deal that I agree with. He emphasized the huge amount of uncertainty that still remains, the fact that Kaïs Saïed has not consulted with anyone. There's been zero consultation—no other political parties or civil society actors have been brought on board. He emphasized that the best prediction for what might be coming down the [pike] still looks like an authoritarian Gaddafi-inspired system, which I also agree with. And he emphasized the importance of procedures and best practices. I think part of the reaction to Saïed's power grab on July 25 was to call into question the importance of democratic procedures, of constitutional rule, rule of law, of free and fair elections. And I think it's really important that we listen to what Amine said and remember the importance of procedures and best practices, because it's hard to have economic and social justice, [or] important reforms on those fronts, without politically representative governments.

I think so often about Turkey, which is the other country besides Tunisia where I've spent the most time in the course of my adult life. And there's a lot about the kind of knee-jerk nativist, almost xenophobic at times, type of populism that Kaïs Saïed has been preaching that reminds me of [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan, the ruler of Turkey. And anybody who's been following Turkey's economy right now knows that it can be very dangerous when you leave all of the political reins of power to decide about the economy and its future in the hands of one individual who has unchecked power. And that's certainly the case in Tunisia.

So it looks unlikely that, despite this very, very vague roadmap, which promises a kind of digital consultation, a sort of e-plebiscite, legislative elections—of course, not presidential elections—one year down the pike—despite this, there's still not much clarity. And the best predictions at this point in time still look very much like they did on the morning of July 26. And I say that with some large measure of sadness. I think, instead of asking, “can Tunisia's democracy survive,” it would be a lot more realistic and appropriate to ask, “can Tunisia's democracy be restored?”

Because since July 25, Tunisia has not been a democracy; Tunisia has been a dictatorship. Formally, all three reins of power, all three branches of power, are in the hands of one individual. And that individual was and still is Kaïs Saïed, despite his appointment of a cabinet, despite his announcing that there are going to be legislative elections in one year's time. A lot can happen in a year. The constitution of Tunisia has not given him any authority to unilaterally dissolve parliament or to freeze parliament, which is what parliament's current status is. It has not given him authority to totally remake Tunisia's constitutional system. So we have been operating in a totally extra-constitutional dictatorship since July 25. And I think it's really, really important to just remember that. “Can Tunisia's democracy be restored,” I think is the question that I'll be trying to address today in my later comments.

Which brings me to another part of your question, Amy. You asked about the reaction of various political forces in Tunisia. And I think another way of phrasing your question is, why is it that there has not been a cross-ideological coalition formed yet in Tunisia in opposition against Kaïs Saïed's power grab, which I might also refer to as a coup? You know, it fits the classical model of Latin American *autogolpe* or self-made coup. So why is it that we haven't seen a

cross-ideological opposition coalition form that's been effective at all? I think we haven't seen that yet in large part because the “[[Tunisian National Dialogue](#)] Quartet” that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015—UGTT [the Tunisian General Labor Union], UTICA [the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts]—[the] labor union [and] employers’ association[, respectively]—the Bar Association [Tunisian Order of Lawyers], and the Tunisian League of Human Rights [LTDH]—they were brought together largely by their desire to get Ennahda—the center right party, which some called Islamists, in Tunisia—to get it out of power. They were really unified despite a lot of their differences in that desire.

A similarly unifying desire does not exist amongst that Quartet of actors today. So if you've ever found yourself wondering why they can't seem to get the old band back together, of the Quartet, that has a lot to do with it. I think in the initial weeks after the power grab on July 25, we saw different opportunistic calculations being made on the part of UGTT [and] a lot of different political parties who thought that they might get appointments in this new system of government or thought that they might get a large role in determining the direction of the government. That has not materialized.

However, it's important to emphasize that those different political parties and civil society actors understand that those positions and input have not materialized. Kaïs Saïed, as Amine so rightly said, has done zero consultation. Which, you know, in terms of his own realpolitik calculations probably isn't the smartest move in terms of entrenching his own one-man rule sustainably as swiftly as possible.

So opposition and anger is mounting in Tunisia. Just this morning, we saw a press conference of four secularly oriented opposition parties: Ettakatol (Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedoms), Attayar (Democratic Current), Jomhuri (Republic), and Afek Tounes. It looks like for the very first time those parties have explicitly called on their supporters to demonstrate against Kaïs Saïed on December 17, which is, of course, the 11-year anniversary of the suicide that led to Tunisia's revolution. And that might also be a kind of signal to Ennahda, as messy of a state as Ennahda is currently in, that they might want to build some kind of a cross-ideological platform. But it would probably be done implicitly, because there's a real kind of pox, for various fair and unfair reasons, on Ennahda.

Amy Hawthorne [16:26]

Thank you, Monica. You gave us a lot to digest and think about and I very much agree with your recommendation about how the title of this event should be reframed, [to] “Can Tunisia's democracy be restored?” [or] “Can Tunisia's democracy return?” Thank you for that.

Amna, I'd like to turn next to you and ask if you could tell our audience a bit about how Tunisian civil society is responding to Kaïs Saïed's moves and this total upending of Tunisia's political transition into, as Amine said, a transition to something else—[it is] unknown where things are heading exactly politically. How has civil society responded to this? Are key civil society groups coalescing around sort of a defense of democracy, or is the field splintered along different issues and along different lines? And if you could say a sentence or two specifically about

UGTT, the main labor union, which as we know has been one of the most important political actors and civil society actors on the scene. Thank you so much, Amna, over to you.

Amna Guellali [17:49]

Thank you very much, Amy. And thanks for inviting me, and thanks for organizing this very timely event.

President Saïed's move succeeded in dividing civil society in an unprecedented way. This has had an effect on the ability of civil society to oppose the power drift and kind of allowed him to consolidate his power.

So following the 25th of July decisions, I believe that civil society was divided into three groups. There is a minority group that condemned the president's announcements and warned that it will represent a threat to democracy and human rights. A second group did not condemn the decision and considered it to be an opportunity for a new situation in Tunisia while at the same time warning of the impact it could have on the human rights situation. And a third group was supportive of Kaïs Saïed. So these are the three categories of the civil society groups—how the division was laid out after the announcement of the 25th of July.

Now, I believe that this [division] has had a negative impact on the ability of civil society to mobilize its forces to push back against this threat to freedoms, to democracy, and to human rights. And this contrasts, really, with the role that civil society has played throughout the 10 years of the democratic transition in Tunisia, whereby civic forces have pushed for a reform agenda and have led the efforts to consolidate democracy and human rights in the country on several fronts and through several forms of activism, and where[by] civil society really represented a bulwark against any form of backsliding into authoritarianism or into dictatorship.

It's really striking to compare these two images: the image of civil society predating the 25th of July, where many organizations—including just before the announcement—were gathering in the streets, were calling for their supporters and other groups to join the effort to resist against any form of dictatorship, to denounce policy abuses, etc., and so mobilizing in thousands through the streets of Tunis and elsewhere; [and the image] after the 25th of July, [when] there were no street protests organized by major civil forces, including UGTT, despite the gravity and seriousness of the risks posed to the democratic process.

The question here is, why is this so? How can we explain this lack of strong reaction from civil society, including UGTT, towards the risks posed to the democratic process and to freedoms and rights in the country? I believe the answer is twofold and/or multi-fold. Monica has touched upon some of the reasons. I think, first of all, various forces composing the civic space in Tunisia considered that Kaïs Saïed's move to suspend the parliament was a necessary evil to get rid of a corrupt political class sitting in the parliament and viewed his activation of Article 80 of the constitution as a possible way out of the political crisis and an end to the deadlock that had plagued Tunisia for months.

Several important human rights associations and NGOs had been calling for months, for example, before the 25th of July, for the dismissal or the resignation of Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi at the time and raising and sounding the alarm bell about the deteriorating economic and social situation. And so they viewed, initially, the move by Kais Saïed to uphold exceptional powers as an opportunity to put Tunisia back on track of a stalled democratic process.

The other reason, in my view, is that they thought initially that this decision will open the space for a new political and civil dialogue, similar to what happened in 2013 during the crisis after the assassination of the two political leaders [Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi], when civil society played a crucial role and created the Quartet. Monica mentioned it, it's a gathering of civic forces composed of four major civil society actors: UGTT; LTDH, the Tunisian League for Human Rights; the employers' union [UTICA], and the Bar Association. The decision by Saïed reminded them of the importance of this space and the opportunity that this might create.

However, I believe that it became increasingly clear that Saïed was not interested in any type of dialogue and was adamantly rejecting the political class and all civil actors through demonizing rhetoric: calling all his opponents and all those who don't agree with his views "traitors" or corrupt people. I believe that this also created some more wariness inside civil society. However, this [has] not translate[d] so far into an effort to mobilize against his decisions. And so for now, what we are observing is a form of fragmentation of the civic forces and a lack of strong opposition to this gradual erosion of the rule of law.

What is even more concerning, in my view, is that part of civil society in Tunisia has espoused Saïed's sovereigntist and nationalistic rhetoric and have issued statements and positions almost paralleling Saïed's discourse. This is really concerning. I think also that what civil society's understanding, more and more, is that the president is intent on undermining not only the political class, but also civic actors, whom he sees as part of the problem. His move, for example, to change the revolution [holiday] from the 14th of January, the day of [Zine El Abidine] Ben Ali's ouster, to the 17th of December, is, in my view, part of his attempt to rewrite and change the narrative and to downplay the role of civil society. Because what happened from the 17th of December to the 14th of January was really the mobilization of civil actors, of political actors, leading, then, to this revolution day. So whether this will be a wake up call remains to be seen. Thank you.

Amy Hawthorne [26:37]

Amna, you've really cogently and clearly laid out for us why Tunisia's civil society is not able to—or doesn't choose to, for the most part in, any consolidated form—serve as a bulwark against the possible return of autocracy. And thank you for mentioning, so importantly, the economic crisis that Tunisia is still going through, and the sense of acute political and economic and social and health crisis that was prevailing in the country in the months and weeks leading up to July 25 that created the atmosphere in which Kais Saïed made his moves. Since he has grabbed power, the economic situation has not improved; I believe it has become even more dire and even more acute.

Next, Amine, I'd like to ask you to talk a bit about the political ramifications of this economic crisis that Tunisia is going through. You wrote something for POMED back in June, in which you said that the improvement of the economic situation in Tunisia was the single most important thing that needed to happen in order to keep Tunisia's democratization and democratic transition going. That was back in June, before the events of July 25 and Kaïs Saïed's power grab. Could you tell us how you see the political/economic situation in Tunisia today? How do you see President Saïed leading Tunisia out of its severe economic crisis? And if the economy worsens—and we sincerely hope that it doesn't, because a lot of Tunisians are really suffering and have been suffering economically—but if, unfortunately, the economic situation becomes more dire, how will this affect Kaïs Saïed's governance and his plans for what he wants to do in Tunisia? Thank you so much, Amine, over to you.

Amine Ghali [29:02]

Thank you, and I'll give you some comments on this question, but also give some comments [on] what Amna has been saying, and you'll see that at the end it joins on the same track.

I think after 10 years—or even, I wouldn't say 10 years, after five [or] six years—in Tunisia, the street is not mobilized anymore for democracy issues. Today, or [for] the past few years, democracy is not appealing. People do not go to the street anymore, except for some exceptions, but compared to 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, where people were going into the street to call for democracy, [for] achievements on the constitution, on election[s], on election law, on many other things, and on transitional justice. Today the street is not mobilized anymore on democracy issues and democracy-related issues.

The single thing that still mobilizes the street is the economy. We saw this in almost [every year] for the past few years, every month of January. We call the month of January as the month of protest for the past few years, because this is the month where people start to see the impact of the fundamental law of the budget. When the government announces the new measures for the new year in the budget, people start to see them in January and that's when people go to the street.

Probably this year will be no exception to this, because today, we are not seeing any single decision on the economy. The government and the president are working on [a] very closed agenda. We do not see any negotiation like we used to—we started to be used to it in the parliament when preparing this annual budget. Today, we don't see any of this. What we will see is January 1 and January 2—[the first] or second day of the year—we'll start to see [these] new measures of the economy. And that's probably when people will start to express their protests in the street, on the internet, going back to political parties, to their civil society groups, to their peer groups. That's when we will start to see this protest.

And that's probably when we will start to see the new questioning of this new legitimacy of the president. Yes, as Monica and as Amna said, maybe people who were happy on the [July] 25th see these new measures as measures that help them get rid of the failing state or failing government of Mechichi. And [the] very negative perception of the parliament, maybe that's why

people applauded the 25th of July and are still somehow happy with these decisions. But in January, that's when we will start [seeing] people questioning this new legitimacy, because they will see the renewing of the economic suffering.

Yes, people are happy with free Tunisia. Yes, people are happy with free and fair elections, with freedom of the press, with all of the virtues of democracy. But at the end of the day, they need more food on their plates, they need better services, better transportation, [a] more just and equitable tax [and] fiscal system. All of this will not be happening, especially [now] that we are seeing Tunisia entering a new cycle of negotiations with [the] IMF—not because we love the IMF, but because our economic situation is very critical. We need to go to international institutions, especially [now] that it looks like the promised help from Gulf countries is not coming. It looks like—again, I insist on this because there is no open dialogue, open discussion on the economic fate since July 25—but we thought, or we were under the impression, collectively, that Gulf countries will be helping Tunisia pay some of its debts and [inaudible]. But it looks [like] this help is not happening. Tunisia is turning back to [the] IMF. With this critical situation of the economy, [the] IMF and international institutions will be pushing for some hard measures that will impact probably everyone, but of course will impact more the poor people and people who would go to the street and demonstrate against these measures. And when this happens, I think Kaïs Saïed will come from his kind of throne of 80 or 90 percent support to regular levels, like other governments, like other presidents, and all of this legitimacy would be questioned again.

Amy Hawthorne [34:34]

Thank you, Amine. Just to follow on your very interesting remarks, in the past, at least, Tunisia's national budget, as you mentioned, was a document that was hashed out in parliament and the result, at least, of some bargaining among some political forces. Now that Kaïs Saïed holds all the decision-making [power]—economic, political, etc.—how do you think people, political forces, and others will respond to him being the sole decision maker on the economy? Or will he need to turn to others to build consensus for what could be painful measures?

Amine Ghali [35:23]

Well, as it appears, as of now, there is no effort to build consensus with the current system. But what is sure is that when you concentrate all of the powers, you concentrate all of the responsibility, and you concentrate all of the accountability. You cannot take all the powers into a very centralized system, and then, when it comes to responsibility and accountability, send it to others. You need to be coherent with yourself. A system needs to be coherent with itself. If you concentrate all of it in one hand, this hand needs to be accountable. And this hand needs to be responsible for all of these decisions. And that's why, when everyone thinks now that Kaïs Saïed is the main player—even with the new government, even with the declarations of the government, even when we see the ministerial cabinet meetings presided [over] by the president—[it] means that the president is responsible for all of the political decisions. And that will mean, in a few months, that he will take responsibility for successes, and for failures, of the government.

Amy Hawthorne [36:47]

Thank you. Amna, I'd like to go back to you now and ask if you could tell us how you view the situation at present and in the coming months for rights and freedoms. As we know, Tunisia has made significant gains in rights and freedoms, political rights and freedoms in particular, in the past 10 years. To what extent are those rights and freedoms at risk? And who will defend them when they come under severe threat? Or perhaps you believe that they already are under severe threat now. Thank you.

Amna Guellali [37:22]

Thank you, Amy, for the question. I think human rights are at risk right now on many levels in Tunisia. The first level is the fact that the unprecedented concentration of powers in the hands of President Kaïs Saïed creates an environment conducive to human rights abuses. The absence of any supervisory powers, including any authority that would review the president's acts, in my view, is an outright weakening of human rights.

The second level of why human rights are at risk right now in the country is the fact that both President Saïed's acts and rhetoric represent an erosion and undermine the very meaning of the rule of law, which is an important concept for the preservation of human rights in any system of governance. Rule of law refers to the structure through which the exercise of power is subjected to agreed rules and in which rights and freedoms can be exercised within an agreed-upon framework, which is structured and where people can predict the consequences of their acts.

What President Saïed is doing is really a gradual and incremental erosion of this rule of law, as he's shaking the basis of this normative framework that guarantees these rights and freedoms. And so what we saw recently is [that] he attacked the constitution and considered it to be illegitimate. And this therefore represents an attack against the substantive, normative framework for the rights and freedoms that we have in Tunisia, because the constitution has an entire chapter that is dedicated to the rights and to freedoms and to consecrating these rights. So the fact that he attacks the constitution as illegitimate and considers it to be nullified, in a way, is definitely something of a concern.

The second thing I wanted to highlight is the fact that the announcement he made yesterday of the roadmap, including, as we know, this digital consultation, online consultation with the population about the new constitution and new system of governance—this still is very vague. It's still obscure and opaque. We don't know what kind of questions will be asked to the public. But what if some of the questions included questions about rights and freedoms. And what if, after the consultation with the population, a majority of the views during the consultation reject equality, uphold discrimination and gender discrimination, call for the reinstatement and the application of the death penalty, [or] considers that LGBT rights should not have any place in the Tunisian system?

All of that opens the door for all kinds of undermining of the legal system protecting human rights in the country. And so in my view, it remains to be seen what will happen with the

consultation. And hopefully the system of rights and freedoms will not be included in the consultation, because that will open Pandora's box in a way.

The other level in which there is a high threat to human rights right now in Tunisia is the lack of accountability. And while arbitrariness, impunity, and lack of accountability have always been a problem in the country, they are now heightened by the current political environment. So with no parliament, no constitutional court, or no court or institution that plays the temporary role of Constitutional Court and controls the constitutionality of laws or the decrees that the president will be taking—with the constitution that is kind of suspended and utterly delegitimized by the president's rhetoric, and no checks and balances on the acts of the highest authority in the state, I think that security forces are operating in a seemingly partial vacuum right now. And while President Saïed has called for accountability for political actors and businessmen, and really is pushing the judiciary to hold them accountable, he has never hinted [at] accountability for the security forces, which is quite striking.

And also the efforts toward accountability [in] the transitional justice system are also stalled. There is no progress when it comes to holding those who have committed grave and serious human rights abuses to account.

In addition to all of that, accountability is undermined by the fact that the judicial system is discredited by the president, who has attacked, in a very systematic way, the judicial system and called it a corrupt system and questioned the validity of the laws and legal frameworks put in place after the revolution to create a new independent judiciary. So all of that makes a recipe for an unaccountable system with heightened risk for human rights in terms of impunity and lack of accountability.

Amy Hawthorne [44:11]

Thank you so much, Amna. You highlighted so many crucial things in your remarks: the undermining of the judiciary and the judicial system, which is a very worrying sign in my view; the possibility—although as you rightly noted, it's still unclear—but the possibility of putting a discussion of hard-won rights and freedoms that were enshrined in the 2014 constitution, which had wide, popular acceptance and support, potentially putting those rights and freedoms up for some sort of public discussion whose parameters, whose integrity are unclear. And then, of course, perhaps the most important point that you reminded us of is the lack of accountability in the system when one person holds all the power. So [these are] very important and, in my view, concerning things to keep in mind.

Monica, I'd like to turn back to you and ask you if you could share your thoughts and answer for us—as a long-time watcher of Tunisia and a very, very highly respected expert on Tunisia, observing it from the inside and the outside over the last decade—if you could respond to the alternative title that you suggested for this event. How can, [or] can Tunisia's democracy be restored? So after all that's happened since July 25, and the upending of the game by Kai's Saïed, can Tunisia's democracy be restored? Who will do the restoring? What would that take?

And share your thoughts on how you would answer that question to the alternative title that you wisely suggested for this event.

Monica Marks [46:04]

So my aspirational answer to that question is: Well, sure, anything's possible. But my more realistic answer to that question is, I don't envision a scenario in which whatever happens in Tunisia's transition—if we can still call it that—doesn't leave the country worse off than it was before July 25. And there were a lot of big problems before July 25 that Tunisians know better than anybody else. That's part of what got them to the streets and what primed them for Kais Saïed's coup.

So what are the potential ways forward? I think one potential way forward would be absolutely mass protest on a similar scale to what we saw in the revolution of 2011. That's probably unlikely, at least in the short term, for reasons that Amine laid out. He was talking about how the Tunisian public has grown a bit tired of protesting for democracy and is much more concerned about the economy. But depending on how the economy goes, that's going to affect Kais Saïed's popularity a lot. And he has no economic plan whatsoever. I think his lack of an economic plan partially explains last night's announcements. He's probably trying to make positive noises, signals, to international partners like the IMF and the World Bank, in hopes of securing Tunisia some kind of negotiation that would lead to a loan. Whether or not it's going to be sufficient, and whether or not it's gonna be sufficient in time, I think looks pretty unlikely. But we'll see how those organizations respond.

I think a combination of mass protests that would be backed up by a cross-ideological opposition coalition of some sort—we were discussing the reasons why that really hasn't gotten off the ground yet, but I think different political players could do a lot more to make that happen.

As I said before, for reasons both fair and unfair, Ennahda has been kind of “hexed.” At the moment, it's sort of like the reverse Midas touch: Anybody who touches Ennahda turns, not to gold, but to some vulgar substance that is the opposite of gold, in terms of their political popularity in Tunisia. But [Rached] Ghannouchi, the leader of Ennahda, could do more to signal his defense of parliament as an institution, but also his readiness to get out of the way, if indeed that's what needs to happen for a cross-ideological opposition coalition to form. There's been a lot of unrest, a lot of pushback within Ennahda itself about Ghannouchi's increasingly strong role within the party and how that might have marginalized or silenced a lot of different, more critical voices within Ennahda. It's clear to a lot of people within the party that Ghannouchi offers Kais Saïed an easily demonizable figure and an easy counterpoint.

So if Ghannouchi were to do something like convene parliament virtually and make it clear that he was happy to step down because he felt like that was the best thing for democracy in Tunisia to move forward, that might be a good positive step for more secularly or anti-Ennahda-oriented members of a potential cross-ideological opposition coalition. It could be that something like a virtual parliament in exile needs to be formed moving forward that issues counter-statements

against statements that Kaïs Saïed is putting out. I think we could see a lot more positive leadership on the defending-Tunisia's-institutions front and the importance-of-processes front.

And also, I think it shouldn't be overlooked that political parties can and should be doing more to communicate to the Tunisian public that, "We heard you, we understand that there was a lot of paralysis before. And we have some kind of inspiring vision to move forward." A vision that includes standing up strongly for rule of law, standing up strongly for a return to a democratically representative order. It's unclear whether any of those elements are going to happen.

I think it's very, very possible that Kaïs Saïed, through proposals like the one he made last night, is simply buying more time in the hopes that some of his supporters will opt to wait and see. But as people are waiting and seeing, an authoritarian system becomes entrenched. And it's not an enlightened authoritarian system, even, not something that we could even compare to [Habib] Bourguiba's rule. This is a person who has no vision and has made no steps towards dialogue on the economic front or on human rights or other things that are vital to Tunisians' political, economic, and social justice and health. We could see a situation where dictatorship becomes entrenched, like it did in 1987 in Tunisia.

Often, Tunisia is the best comparison to Tunisia after July 25. A lot of Tunisians said, "Don't compare us to Egypt!" I said, "I'm not!" Maybe we should think about Tunisia in comparison to itself. You know, when Ben Ali—the prior dictator, who was unseated in the revolution of 2011—took over in 1987, he did so under far more auspicious, optimistic-looking circumstances than Kaïs Saïed did. He brought a national dialogue together, this national pact. He came to power preaching democratic *changement*, legalizing political parties, all these steps that looked like they could be positive. Of course, we know how the story ended. It didn't turn out that way.

Kaïs Saïed has made no such positive noises. There's been a lot of chaos, a lot of demonization. As Amna so rightly mentioned, he has done a lot to systematically delegitimize Tunisia's constitution of 2014, which passed after years of contestation and quite inclusive processes. And it was a difficult journey, but Tunisia managed to get there, and he's totally thrown that in the dumpster. He said that we need to abolish the constitution. He's actually used the word "abolish" in Arabic, calling any political party—even those who were initially with him on July 25—calling them traitors.

So I think it's very important that we don't lose sight of just how far outside any semblance of a constitutional order we are. Tunisians don't have any political rights right now. And the outlook, sadly, appears very grim at the moment. That doesn't mean that getting back on some path towards pluralistic governance isn't possible. But as I said earlier, I don't see how Tunisia gets back on a road that's not considerably more potholed than the road it was on in the summer, as messy and as difficult as that was. As some Tunisians who I spoke to immediately after Kaïs Saïed's actions of July 25 said, "We knew the patient was sick." These were obviously more politically oriented Tunisians, a lot of Tunisians didn't feel that way. But they said, "We knew the patient was sick. But the solution wasn't shooting the patient in the face. The solution was healing the patient." I wish I could be more positive.

Amy Hawthorne [54:03]

Thank you, Monica, for laying out that very sobering prognosis. You've given us a lot to think about, and I'm personally finding it hard to think of how to disagree with your analysis. But in the few minutes that we have left, before we turn to Senator Murphy for his remarks, I'd like to ask Amna and Amine if you would like to react to Monica's analysis. Do you share her pessimism? Do you see, alternatively, signs of hope and scenarios under which Tunisians could restore—maybe not restore, but return to—a clear process of democratization?

Monica Marks [54:50]

Let me just say, I hope so. I want to be wrong so badly!

Amy Hawthorne [54:54]

Right, right, of course. We all do. Amine, would you like to reflect on that briefly in the last few minutes we have?

Amine Ghali [55:01]

Yes, very briefly. I would say, despite not accepting most of Kais Saïed's decisions made, or announcement or whatever, but I genuinely think there is no way of returning back to before July 25. Going back to the same parliament, to the same system is a little bit unrealistic. We will not go to this chaotic setting very much. And I'm saying this because it is a very much disapproved political scene that we had. The public disapproved the scene of the parliament, under the leadership of Ghannouchi but also with all of the players. [T]hose of you who have some exposure to this parliament would agree with what I'm saying. But having said this, I think we should have a return to parliament, to [a] parliamentary system, to a regular system—not necessarily the same parliament of July 24, but a parliamentary system.

Again, we are not reinventing the wheel. We're not reinventing democracy. We cannot wait another 12 months without parliament, another 12 months of a sole-man leadership. Who knows, maybe during these 12 months, we'll have a confirmation of some form of authoritarianism. So again, back to some form of parliamentarian [inaudible].

Improvement of the economic situation: This is what we hope [for] the most because at the end of the day, Tunisians are suffering from [a] bad economy, bad decisions on the economy, a bad recovery or an impossible recovery of the economy. And Tunisians, again, need to take part, to participate, in this national effort of a new political system (if there is a new political system) and to take part in the economic recovery in order to accept whatever happens. Because we've seen that we ensured the maximum participation the past 10 years, and yet, at the end, people refused the system. So what if they do not take part in it? What if they reject in one year—or two years, or three years—all of the system? We cannot afford to go [back] to these cycles and episodes of transition and refusal and transition and refusal. So I hope the future will be a little bit more optimistic than what Monica said. I don't have the recipe. But I know that the collective intelligence, the collective cleverness of the people is better than the individual cleverness of one person.

Amy Hawthorne [58:17]

Thank you. Amna, in the couple of minutes that you have left with us, what is your reaction to both what Monica and Amine have said?

Amna Guellali [58:28]

I think I am leaning towards a more pessimistic view. Despite all the hope we have in seeing the Tunisian democratic system being put on track again, the reality on the ground is really, in my view, grim because what we have right now in Tunisia is totally the opposite of what a democratic transition should look like, and it's a situation where the will of the people is also hijacked by—and the entire system of governance is totally hijacked by—one person. And I believe that the civic forces and political forces will—have already—gradually realized that there is no space for dialogue, and will mobilize, of course, and there will be more taking to the streets and mobilization through activism, through demonstrations, etc. But I doubt that this will tip the situation immediately.

I believe the economic situation—Amine has pointed that out very clearly—the economic situation and the hardship that the people go through will be the tipping point. But that does not mean that the democratic transition will be on track again, because then it's going to be really total chaos. And violence might ensue from these kinds of large-scale demonstrations, met also by violence from the security forces, as we saw last January, but in a way that can go totally out of control.

And what worries me the most is that the president has now created a new roadmap with a timeline that has eliminated and completely obscured any form of reflection on the economic situation. Tunisia, after 10 years of a shaky democratic transition that focused on civil and political rights and on the creation of a new system of governance after decades of dictatorship, didn't really need a reinstatement of the discussion around the system of governance. That's not what we need. We need to focus on economic and social rights. We need to focus on the economic hardship. We need to find solutions for the people, for the deadlock in which the economy is right now, for the deteriorating state of the Tunisian economy. And what the president is doing is totally the opposite. He is re-putting us again in the same discussions about how the system of governance should be. Is it a presidential, is it a legislative system of governance? What kind of checks and [balances]? All of that is something that should have been resolved years before. We are now again having, like this here, where all the real discussions will be postponed again.

Amy Hawthorne [1:02:35]

Thank you so much, Amna. We've just gotten word from Senator Murphy's staff that he's in a hearing and will be joining us in a few minutes. So I'd like to impose on Monica and Amine—Amna, I believe that you have to leave us now—to take some questions from the audience. So before I turn to an audience question: Thank you so much, Amna, for being with us and for sharing your incredible insights and very clear—and I have to say, not uplifting—but very, very important analysis. So thank you so much for joining us and we hope to see you

again soon. And Amine and Monica, let me pose one of the questions that's come in from the audience. Monica, I don't know if you'd like to take this one, but do we know to what extent President Saïed has support within the Tunisian security forces? Is that something that is known or is it unknown?

Monica Marks [1:03:39]

The Tunisian security forces are famously like a black box, especially if you're referring to the *wizarat al dakhiliyya*, the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Interior, of all elements of the Tunisian state, is the least reformed and has arguably been the most in need of reform since the revolution. As we know, police impunity, police brutality have been massive and ongoing problems that the best Tunisian analysts, including those at the table with us today, and Tunisia watchers have been really highlighting for the past decade.

So if you're talking about the security forces under the Ministry of Interior—my disclaimer, I don't know, it's a black box, [it's] very hard to get access—but we do know that Kaïs Saïed, as Amna said, has been mollicoddling them a lot in terms of his rhetoric and his policies. One of the most tragic things that I saw after Kaïs took over on July 25, is a lot of Tunisians I've spoken with seemed to express hope that he would be the one, out of everybody who's tried to reform the security sector, that he would be the one who could actually do it—could put an end to police brutality, could get the police off their sons' backs (literally, in some cases). But he had never made any noises to give people that hope. So police unions in Tunisia have been infamously opposed to far-ranging reforms and accountability. Kaïs Saïed is—it's clear from a lot of the messaging from police unions and from interviews I've done that they were very positive about his takeover.

When we shift our attention to the Ministry of Defense, the army, that portrait might look a little bit different. The Ministry of Defense is increasingly getting roped in—sorry, it's late here in Dubai, it's been a long day—there's been increasing efforts on the part of Kaïs Saïed to rope the Ministry of Defense, to rope the Tunisian army, into politics, [into] taking political positions. Most famously, we have the image of the army tank actually blocking off Tunisia's democratically elected parliament. There have been a lot of people asking questions about whether Tunisia's army might become a more coup-prone army, whether it might actually get more involved in politics. I don't know enough about it to say. There are other experts, I think some of whom are in attendance here, who could speak a lot more intelligently to this than I could, and I'm curious to hear, Amine, what you have to say on this too.

But, if the Tunisian state looks extraordinarily unstable, if you saw massive, massive protests, economic instability, outrage, and then Kaïs Saïed having no plan—which is entirely conceivable—would it be possible for the Ministry of Defense to intervene in such a manner as to try to maybe either make a coup on top of a coup, or perhaps more positively, to pull Tunisia back onto some kind of democratic pathway, toward holding actual representative elections for parliament or president? It's conceivable, it's conceivable.

Amy Hawthorne [1:07:12]

Thank you, Monica. So I think now we're—

Monica Marks [1:07:15]

But I should defer to Amine on some of this, too. So, Amine, if you want to come in later on that.

Amy Hawthorne [1:07:19]

Amine, would you like to just share a sentence or two, and then we're actually going to be ready—oh, sorry, I'm just getting word now that we're ready to move to Senator Murphy. So thank you. Thank you, panelists, and thank you, speakers, for being flexible with the vagaries of the Senate schedule. There actually has been an SFRC meeting happening right now and we're very glad that Senator Murphy can join us shortly. So I'm going to wrap up this panel. I'd like to sincerely thank Amine Ghali from Tunis and Monica Marks in Abu Dhabi for sharing your frank and cogent assessment and wisdom. And we look forward to meeting with you again soon to look at where things are going. Thanks so much to our audience. And now I will say goodbye. I'll say goodbye and turn it over to POMED's Executive Director, Steve McInerney. Thanks, everyone.

**PANEL 2 –
A VIEW FROM CONGRESS**

Stephen McInerney [1:08:19]

Thank you, Amy. And thank you to our three panelists for an excellent and informative discussion over the past hour. We're now going to shift the discussion a bit to United States policy and the U.S.-Tunisia relationship. I'm now very pleased to welcome Senator Chris Murphy for this discussion. Senator Murphy has served as the junior senator from Connecticut since 2013, following six years in the U.S. House of Representatives. Senator Murphy has been a real leader in the congress on foreign policy issues, dating to his time in the house. He now serves on the Senate Appropriations Committee and at [the] subcommittee for State and Foreign Operations, which is responsible for foreign aid globally. He also serves on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC), where he's just come to us from an SFRC hearing, and as the chair of the SFRC's Subcommittee for the Near East, South and Central Asia, and Counterterrorism. I would also just add that Senator Murphy has long been one of the leading supporters of democracy and human rights abroad on Capitol Hill, and also one of the strongest proponents of U.S. support for Tunisia's democratic transition over the past decade.

Thank you very much for joining us, Senator. We've just concluded a panel discussion on the precarious situation in Tunisia, including responses to President Kaïs Saïed's speech yesterday announcing a roadmap for the period ahead. As my first question to you, could you just briefly highlight why, as a United States Senator, you believe that these events in Tunisia should be important to the United States?

Sen. Chris Murphy [1:09:12]

Well, Stephen, thanks for having me, and thanks for convening this really important event today, especially with the announcement last night of this new “roadmap,” albeit a very long road that has been presented to his country by President Saïed. I think it's important for policymakers to be able to glean the wisdom of the folks that you've put together.

Listen—no secret—Tunisia was a bright spot coming out of the Arab Spring. It was a country that we pointed to as to what was possible in the Middle East and North Africa; how, even in a country with a history of despotism, democracy could work. And it didn't work well, but the people had a say in who led and the policies that they put forward.

Tunisia, of course, is an important counterterrorism partner, and so Tunisia matters from a security perspective. But more broadly, listen, we are in a global fight for the health and perseverance and preservation of democracy. And so my belief is that our democracy here in the United States is under threat. And when democracy is under threat anywhere, it's under threat everywhere. So I think we have an obligation as a fragile democracy ourselves to try to protect those that are under siege.

So those are the reasons that I think Tunisia matters to us. We've also spent a lot of taxpayer dollars there in the last 10 years, helping to seed the growth of Tunisian democracy. And for all of those reasons, I was very glad to go there just several months ago with Senator [Jon] Ossoff to spend some time on the ground learning and trying to put forward a vision for how America can help Tunisia get through this crisis.

Stephen McInerney [1:11:51]

Thanks very much, Senator. The reality is that despite the compelling argument that you just laid out, and despite your own best efforts in the Senate, Tunisia really has not been a priority for the U.S. policymaking community over the past decade. And sadly, that's remained largely the case even during the crisis this year. What more do you believe that the international community and the United States should be doing? Maybe first, what more could have been done before July 25 to help Tunisia avoid the current crisis and its detour in its democratic transition? And secondly, what more could be done now to help Tunisian democracy?

Sen. Chris Murphy [1:12:30]

Well, you know, I spent two hours at least with President Saïed when I was there two months ago. And he spent at least an hour of that time talking to us about the extent of corruption in Tunisia. Some of it sounded like real corruption, some of it sounded a little bit like the political targeting of his opponents. But there's no doubt his rise to power was driven in large part by people's perception of real, actual corruption that was affecting the lives of everyday Tunisians.

And there's this conversation happening in Tunisia in which many folks were beginning to say, “Wait a second, is life actually better with democracy? Were we better off with a single, unitary ruler?” And part of the reason why Saïed was so popular coming out of the gates was because democracy simply hadn't delivered, in part because it hadn't delivered on the question of corruption. So I am a big believer that there is no way for the United States to defend

democracies around the world unless we are dramatically upscaling the amount of money and funding and programming that we dedicate to fighting corruption. Well, we provided a lot of military aid to Tunisia during the last half a decade to decade. We just didn't do enough in helping that government try to expand the rule of law.

Second, I think you are right that Tunisia has not been enough of a focus for the United States and our European partners, and good old fashioned elbow grease matters here. That's the reason why Jon Ossoff and I went to Tunisia. I do think that high-level contacts and high-level visits do make it a lot harder for somebody like Saïed, who claims to be trying to save Tunisian democracy from reverting back to a prior form of despotism.

So I do think to the extent that we got a roadmap last night, that is in part due to the fact that we have engaged over the past two months in a lot of high-level contacts. Not as many as we should, but between Secretary Blinken's call, visits from the NSC, our visit, our follow-up after that visit, I think that that matters. And we've got to stay invested at that high level from Congress and the executive branch to either argue for this roadmap to be expedited or, at the very least, for it to stay on target and track.

Stephen McInerney [1:15:14]

Okay, thanks, Senator. I'd like to focus for a moment on Tunisian military and security forces. I would say that, despite the many challenges over the past decade, I think one real success of the U.S.-Tunisia relationship has been the important U.S. role in helping strengthen Tunisia's military, building its capacity to secure Tunisia's borders, to fight terrorism, and to ensure stability and security in the country. This has included several hundred million dollars in military and security assistance that you alluded to provided by the United States in recent years. In the excellent [op-ed](#) that you wrote at the end of September following the trip that you led along with Senator Ossoff to meet with President Saïed and other Tunisian political actors, you wrote that "we must continue to support the Tunisian people with aid, but until democracy is restored, we must reconsider our security assistance package to Tunisia." Can I ask you to just elaborate on what you believe that reconsideration of the U.S. security assistance to Tunisia should look like and how do you believe that such a reconsideration might help increase the chances of return to a democratic path in Tunisia?

Sen. Chris Murphy [11:16:25]

Quite simply, the United States cannot fund attacks on democracy. And, given the fact that the military was used in Tunisia to disband the parliament—and there were scenes broadcast all over Tunisia and the world of military personnel surrounding the parliament and keeping parliamentarians out—and that the military courts have been used to prosecute civilians inside Tunisia, it's clear that for the time being the United States needs to reconsider its support for the Tunisian military, given the military's participation in and complicity with this hopefully temporary suspension of democracy.

So I support the decision made—and advocated for the decision made—by the Senate Appropriations Committee, upon which I sit, to withhold an earmark, for now, in this upcoming

appropriations budget for Tunisian military support, in the way that we've earmarked it in the past. I do think that that support is important to President Saïed and we talked at length about it when we were there. It matters. And if we were to reauthorize an earmark to Tunisian security, it would be a clear signal to President Saïed that there's no accountability from the United States when it comes to this temporary suspension of the people's ability to participate in Tunisian democracy. So listen, I hope—I expect—to be back in the business of advocating for earmarking, in appropriations bills, support for Tunisian security assistance, but not until we know that this roadmap is real.

Stephen McInerney [1:18:18]

Thank you. We've alluded to President's Saïed's speech yesterday, and we just concluded our discussion with three experts who gave their responses and expressed some of the concerns that they have that President Saïed's announced plan may not lead Tunisia back to the democratic path that its citizens want and deserve. I'd like to just ask you to comment on how you saw President Saïed's speech and announcement yesterday and comment a little bit further on how you perceive the roadmap that he outlined, which was long overdue.

Sen. Chris Murphy [1:18:52]

So as you know, President Saïed is deeply invested in portraying an image of somebody who is going to restore Tunisian democracy, reform it to make it work better. And in our meeting, he spent much of the time assuring us that this was his mission, that as a constitutional scholar, his job was to fix what's broken with Tunisian democracy. And so, I came out of that meeting choosing to believe that that commitment is true.

And yet this roadmap is frustratingly incomplete and far too long when it comes to the question of when democracy is restored. You're talking about not having a new constitution until next summer, not having a parliament until a year from now; it certainly doesn't seem that that length of time is necessary to make improvements. [It's] also concerning that there hasn't been any broad public consultation prior to the announcement of the roadmap. The roadmap envisions consultation, but there is no reason that you couldn't have used the second half of this year, after President Saïed grabbed power, to do that early consultation. The announcement about trials against corrupt actors is worrying. There's no doubt that you need to hold people accountable, but it's important that these trials are transparent, that they are in accordance with the rule of law, and that they happen in civilian—not military—courts. So let's spend the next several months arguing for this roadmap to be expedited. Let's hold the president accountable. And let's make clear that there is a future of a strong U.S.-Tunisian partnership, but only if President Saïed remains committed to making good on the promises that he's made to people like me and Senator Ossoff, the promises that he's made to the Tunisian people.

Stephen McInerney [1:21:24]

Thank you very much, Senator. We appreciate you taking the time to join us for this discussion today, despite it being a very busy day of business in the U.S. Senate. We thank you for all the work that you've done on behalf of supporting democracy in Tunisia and elsewhere across the Middle East and North Africa. We look forward to staying in touch with you and working with you

moving forward. Thank you again to our speakers from our previous panel and thanks to all of you in the audience for joining us today. We look forward to continuing to have discussions on these issues. Thank you.