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# AFRICA WEEKLY

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## IN FOCUS

### The political crisis in Tunisia: Three things to know

*Tunisia, home to the Arab Spring, is facing a serious political crisis.*

## AFRICA IN BRIEF

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## COMMENTARY

**The political crisis in Tunisia: Three things to know**

*Tunisia, home to the Arab Spring, is facing a serious political crisis.*

Mohamad Aseel Ummer



Image Source: Al Jazeera

On 30 March, Tunisian President Kais Saied dissolved the parliament that had remained suspended since July 2021 during his power grab. The decision came after a parliamentary session that was held online under the leadership of Ennahda party leader and former speaker Rached Ghannouchi. The session was convened to vote for the repealing of the decrees Saied had passed to ensure a total power grab. In a National Security Council meeting, Saied condemned the session as a “coup attempt.” He also called the former parliamentarians as ‘betrayers’ and said: “We must protect the state from division, we will not allow the abusers to continue their aggression against the state.”

On 31 March, he also said: “There will be no dialogue between those who tried a coup and seek to divide Tunisia.”

On 1 April, the Tunisian anti-terrorism police summoned Ghannouchi and other prominent parliamentarians, thereby escalating the ongoing political tensions. Tunisia, the focal point of Arab spring, was hailed as a beacon of democracy. When other countries that were part of the revolution could not retain their democratic stature, Tunisia remained so.

However, for over a decade, Tunisia has had multiple constitutions, and several number of governments, some barely completing a year. The recent chain of political upheavals can be traced to Saied, an independent politician who was elected to power in 2019. A former law professor, he projected himself as a White Knight crusading against the systematic corruption that has ruined the country’s economy and caused instability.

**The political crisis: Three things to know**

First the parliamentary dissolution. Tunisia witnessed tensions in the early months of 2021 due to a massive rise of covid cases were reported across the country, lack of adequate medical infrastructure and inflation, which people from accessing medical care. The economy was in shambles, and unemployment was at an all-time high. Thousands of Tunisians took to the streets demanding economic and political reforms to tackle the crisis. The government was accused of corruption and political infighting and was labelled incompetent. This prompted Saied to declare the Hicham Mechichi cabinet dissolved and suspended the parliament indefinitely. The former government and parliament were under the leadership of the Islamist Ennahda party; Ghannouchi, the then parliamentary speaker, condemned the presidential decision, terming it a coup and a direct attack on democracy.

Second, popular response. Saied’s decision to dissolve the cabinet and suspend the parliament in July 2021 received with mixed responses. Most Tunisians, weary of the decade long

corruption and misgovernance, welcomed Kais's decision. Most political parties except for the Ennahda welcomed the decision, while rights activists and Kais's political opponents termed it a coup.

Most Tunisians were convinced that with an independent leader like Saied, Tunisia can rebuild and achieve the key principles that led the 2011 revolution. The popular support saw a sharp dip, when the administration initiated its reformative measures such as selective suspension of certain parts of the constitution, the decision to rule by decree, active military involvement and most importantly the evident delay and hesitation to appoint an ad-hoc cabinet after the dissolution of the Mechichi cabinet. After weeks of protest and popular discontent, Saied appointed a cabinet with Najla Boudhan Romadhane as the Prime Minister, the first female leader of a government in the MENA region. The new administration failed to improve the economic conditions of the country as they were often seen in public engaging in endeavors to strengthen the presidential position. Saied declared to hold a referendum to change the constitution; the opposition responded by accusing him of attempting to replace the existing parliamentary system with a presidential system.

Third, emerging authoritarianism. The suspension of various parts of the 2014 Tunisian constitution, Saied's declaration to administer the country based on his decree, and arrest of several opposition leaders signal strengthening of the presidential position. Similarly, the military in the past eight months has started to take active participation in civilian life, most political prisoners underwent trials in military courts, and are being imprisoned in military facilities. This has raised major concerns, as in the past military played very little role in the political affairs and this was often credited as a major reason why the young Tunisian democracy survived for a decade. The

judicial council, an autonomous and the supreme legal authority was also suspended leaving the president virtually untouchable. The current administration is also accused of extreme intolerance for dissent as many prominent political activists and opposition figures are either in prison or under military surveillance. Anti-government protests are dealt with excessive force causing casualties. Many believe Saied is on the march to shape himself into a dictatorial figure like former leader Zine-al-Abideen.

### **From democracy to authoritarian undertones**

Tunisia, home to the Arab Spring is under a major political deadlock and is expected to worsen in the coming months. Kais Saied who was once hailed as a lone crusader against corruption has now an image stained by authoritarianism and dictatorial tendencies. His recent decisions have prompted the various opposition political parties to collectivize their efforts and to form a stronger resistance against the current administration. The future of many political outfits is currently hanging by a thin thread as most of the key figures under investigation in the recent legal row may not be able to participate in electoral politics ever again.

The plummeting economy, coupled with unemployment that soured during the pandemic are issues that are yet to be effectively dealt with. The current political tension will force the administration into a tight corner. Democracy that was once aspired by millions of Tunisians has shrunk to a dispensable notion as many are desperate to stability, economic and political upliftment while an equally driven demography including the opposition parties and labor unions aren't willing to let the democratic rights and individual freedoms to be compromised under the tyrannical rule of Kais Saied. Tunisia, once a symbol of democracy is being reduced to remnants of political infighting.

## AFRICA IN BRIEF

23 March-29 March

By Poulomi Mondal and Apoorva Sudhakar

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### ETHIOPIA

#### Millions await humanitarian aid despite truce

On 29 March, the Ethiopian government said it had deployed all available means to assist citizens in the Tigray. However, the government statement said the Tigrayan side had failed to cooperate. The development comes in the backdrop of the Ethiopian government and the rebel groups declaring a ceasefire for the passage of humanitarian aid after 17 months of conflict. Africanews reported from the statement that the 43 trucks of food aid that the World Food Programme was allowed to deliver could not be delivered to Tigray because TPLF fighters had closed the road. However, the TPLF said humanitarian aid had not arrived in Tigray since the announcement of the truce and said the above were “false claims” by Ethiopian authorities. This ongoing crisis has left millions of people without any aid. (“[Despite humanitarian truce in Tigray, millions still wait for aid](#),” *Africanews*, 30 March 2022)

### SOMALIA

#### UN Security Council voted for a new peacekeeping force in Somalia

On 1 April, the UN Security Council unanimously voted for the creation of a new peacekeeping force in Somalia to be led by the African Union. The new mission, African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) will be replacing the AMISOM which comprises 20,000 military, police and civilians reduced to zero by 2024. The new force will be primarily focused on combating the al Shabaab extremists. The development comes a week after multiple terrorist attacks took place in Mogadishu claiming 48 lives. In response, the US Deputy Ambassador said in the UN termed al Shabaab as “formidable and adaptable

threats to Somalia and East Africa more broadly.” (“[UN Security Council approves new peacekeeping force in Somalia](#),” *Africanews*, 1 April 2022)

### SUDAN

#### Violence in South Darfur claims 45 lives

On 1 April, The East African reported death toll from clashes in South Darfur state had risen to 45. Violence between the Arab Rizeigat tribe and non-Arab Fallata tribe erupted in villages outside South Darfur’s capital, Nyala, on 29 March. The state security committee said 15 people were killed on 29 March and 30 on 30 March. The news report quoted a resident who said the violence began after a Rizeigat person was killed. (“[Sudan's Darfur clashes kill 45: officials](#),” *The East African*, 1 April 2022)

### DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

#### Security Concerns with DR Congo joining East African Community

On 30 March, the East African Community (EAC) heads of state approved the membership of Democratic Republic of Congo as the seventh member of the community. Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi said: “I have always considered the East African community was the best compared to other sub-regional economic blocks in Africa, in terms of free movement of people and goods, infrastructure integration and trade.” The President also suggested creating a new body within the EAC to focus on the environmental and mining activities and management of natural resources. However, the member countries have also expressed concerns regarding the border security issues as well as the profitability and its impact on the Congolese economy. (“[As DR Congo joins the East African Community, residents](#)

[wonder if it is for the best](#),” *Africanews*, 30 March 2022)

### **M23 rebels shot down a MONUSCO reconnaissance helicopter**

On 29 March, eight people were killed after a helicopter with eight UN peacekeepers on board crashed in North Kivu. On 30 March, the Congolese army FARDC said M23 rebels had shot down the helicopter after they regrouped and retook the strategic areas of the DRC since 28 March. The UN says that more than 13,000 people fled their homes due to heavy fighting in the North Kivu region. A press release by the FARDC said “The helicopter was one of the two MONUSCO reconnaissance helicopters with on board eight Blue helmets crew members and United Nations observers.” The Special Representative of the Secretary General for Protection and Operations said “We have spoken to the governor, we have a military base in Bunagana and where there were the first wounded on the FARDC side, obviously welcomed on this base for the first necessary care.” (“[M23 rebels in DR Congo deny shooting down UN helicopter](#),” *BBC*, 30 March 2022 ; “[DR Congo: M23 rebels shoot down MONUSCO helicopter](#),” *Africanews*, 30 March 2022)

### **MALI**

#### **Over 200 militants killed in operation, says army**

On 1 April, the Malian army said 203 militants had been killed in an operation in central Mali’s Mora region between 23 and 31 March; 51 people were arrested and weapons were confiscated. The development comes after social media was flooded by reports of civilians being killed in Mora. On 3 April, the US State Department expressed concerns over the above and offered condolences to the families of the deceased. Referring to the army’s account of incidents, the State Department’s statement said: “These conflicting reports illustrate the urgent

need for the Malian transition authorities to give impartial investigators free, unfettered, and safe access to the area where these tragic events unfolded.” (“[Mali says over 200 fighters killed in military operation](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 2 April 2022; “[US concerned by 'extremely disturbing' Mali massacre reports](#),” *News24*, 4 April 2022)

### **MOZAMBIQUE**

#### **Mozambique welcomes IMF’s resumption of financial aid**

On 30 March, Mozambique’s private sector appreciated the IMF’s announcement to resume financial aid to the country. This came after the IMF announced that it succeeded to reach an agreement with Mozambique for the implementation of an Extended Fund Programme (EEP) until 2025, for disbursing financial assistance in the wake of the debt scandal in 2016. The financial package approved by IMF aims for the fastened recovery of the economy and to promote good governance as well as anti-corruption. President Filipe Nyusi welcomed the move and described it as a “great gain” for the nation. (“[Mozambique welcomes IMF’s announcement of the resumption of financial aid](#),” *Africanews*, 30 March 2022)

### **SOUTH AFRICA**

#### **Anti-xenophobia protests in South Africa**

On 27 March, several citizens and migrants in South Africa staged an anti-xenophobia rally in response to marches against migrants in ‘Operation Dudula’ movement. The Dudula movement gained its popularity on the grounds of rising discontent against the presence of three million refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers in the country. South Africa has also been periodically plagued by xenophobic violence and clashes in 2015, 2016 and 2019. *Africanews* quoted an activist, Mark Heywood: “There are people in our country who are trying to take advantage of the anger, the people

feel about poverty, about unemployment, about hunger, and they are trying to turn that anger onto foreigners, mainly foreigners from other African countries. They are trying to create a fire, a xenophobic fire.” ([“South Africans and migrants march in anti-xenophobia protest,”](#) *Africanews*, 27 March 2022)

### Leader of Operation Dudula released

On 28 March, Nhlanhla Lux Dlamini was released on bail after he was arrested on 24 March on charges of housebreaking, theft, and malicious damage to property. The leader of the South African anti-immigrant vigilante group Operation Dudula thanked his supporters saying: “I want to thank the young people-who are very capable of expressing their youth and being extremely violent in this difficult time-for displaying high and maximum discipline and high morale.” The arrest drew a lot of criticism during the growing anti-immigration protests in South Africa since January this year. The protests, reportedly aimed “to fight for the future of South Africans” and against migrant workers, have been conducted in several cities across the country. The protests also led to by vandalism of shops and demands to fire non-South Africans or slogans accusing the migrants of “stealing” the jobs of the native citizens. ([“S. African anti-immigrant group leader Nhlanhla “Lux” Dlamini released on bail,”](#) *Africanews*, 28 March 2022)

### REGIONAL

#### Nearly 10,000 flee from DRC to Uganda amid violence

On 1 April, the UNHCR reported thousands had fled from the DRC to Uganda after violence erupted in the former’s Kisoro district on 28 March. The UNHCR and Uganda government are assisting an estimated 10,000 people. Meanwhile, within the affected locality in DRC, 36,000 Congolese have been displaced. The UNHCR Representative to Uganda said several unaccompanied children had fled the violence. Uganda,

despite closing its border for trade, has been open for asylum seekers.

([“Thousands escape to Uganda following violent clashes in DR Congo,”](#) *UN News*, 1 April 2022)

### INTERNATIONAL

#### Israel hosts foreign ministers of Arab countries and US Secretary of State

On 28 March, Israel hosted the foreign ministers of four Arab countries - the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt - along with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. This summit was targeted primarily at boosting Israel’s ties with the Arab nations and a display of unity against common enemies. Israel’s Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said: “This new architecture-the shared capabilities we are building-intimidates and deters our common enemies, first and foremost Iran and its proxies”. The ministers discussed the implications of the 2015 JCPOA deal and the importance behind its restoration. However, in case of a negotiation failure, Blinken said: “As neighbours and, in the case of the United States, as friends, we will also work together to confront the common security challenges and threats, including those from Iran and its proxies.” Another key issue of discussion was the unified condemnation of the recent killings of two Israeli officers and six people by the Hamas and the joint reiteration of support for a peaceful solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. ([“Israel says partnership with Arab League allies will deter Iran,”](#) *BBC*, 28 March 2022; [“Israel’s U.S., Arab partners close ranks on Iran, urge Palestinian talks,”](#) *Reuters*, 29 March 2022)

#### Guterres concerned about impact of Mali’s counter-terrorism measures on civilians

On 1 April, Arab News referred to a report obtained by AFP which said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had called on Mali and its bilateral partners to progress along international obligations amid the country’s fight against jihadists. The secret report said Guterres had

expressed concerns over “disastrous consequences for the civilian population” from Mali’s counter-terrorism operations. The news report quoted Guterres: “I emphasize the duty of the State to do everything in its power to promote accountability and ensure that its military operations, including those carried out with its bilateral partners, are carried out in accordance with its international obligations.” (“[UN chief calls for accountability by Mali, military ‘partners’](#),” *Arab News*, 1 April 2022)

**EU urged to treat all migrants like Ukrainian migrants after 90 African migrants drown in the Mediterranean**

On 2 April, Doctors without Borders (MSF) said over 90 people had drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. The victims were traveling to Europe after departing from

Libya. MSF said it had called on Italy and Malta to arrange a safe place for the survivors and urged the European Union border protection agency to present the truth of the incident. On 4 April, UNHRC chief referred to the above and called on the EU to treat all migrants just as it treated Ukrainian migrants. The chief tweeted: “Europe has proven its ability to host 4 million refugees from Ukraine generously and effectively. It must now urgently consider how to apply this to other refugees and migrants knocking, in distress, at its doors.” (“[More than 90 migrants drowned in Mediterranean sea: Doctors Without Borders](#),” *The Hindu*, 3 April 2022; “[EU urged to treat African refugees like Ukrainians](#),” *BBC*, 4 April 2022)

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### About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

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### About the team

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