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IN FOCUS

Tunisia: The question of undocumented migrants

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COMMENTARY

Tunisia: The question of undocumented migrants

The remarks by President Saied seems to be a distraction tactic on the backdrop of prolonging political instability, economic crisis and administrative failures.

Devjyoti Saha



Image source: Muhammad Hamed, Reuters

In February 2023, while addressing the national security council, President Kais Saied called for urgent action to halt the flow of Sub-Saharan migrants claiming that there is a deliberate effort to alter the demography of Tunisia. He said: “Hordes of illegal immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa are still arriving, with all the violence, crime, and unacceptable practices that entails.” The narrative has been initiated by a lesser-known political party called the Parti Nationaliste Tunisien. Saied accused them of planning to transform the demographic character of Tunisia into a pure African country having no connection with the Arab and Islamic world.

The president’s statement inflamed verbal and physical assaults, and xenophobic and racist attacks on African immigrants and migrants in Tunisia; Many sought shelters outside the International Organization for Migration building in the capital Tunis.

International condemnation from the organisations like the UNHCR, the African Union and the World Bank forced the Saied to retract his remarks. He reasserted Tunisia's position as a proud African country and assured that all the documented immigrants should not be

concerned as the government was only acting against illegal migrants.

Tunisia’s political crisis and Saied’s ambitions

Tunisia never achieved the essence of the revolution though the Tunisian uprising triggered the Arab Spring in 2011. Tunisia was the first country in North Africa and the Arab world to introduce legislation that addressed the long-existing problem of racism against African residents and immigrants through the Organic Law 50-2018 that criminalised acts of racism and allowed the victims to seek redressal. However, the political complexities in the country worsened to a political instability after President Kais Saied usurped power in 2021. The legal and bureaucratic system became opaque, making it impossible for undocumented immigrants to seek a legal residence.

Besides this, with Saied strengthening his presidential powers, there has been a massive clampdown on civil society and the fundamental rights for free speech and protests. Saied initiated a series of arbitrary arrests, imprisoning prominent civil society actors and opposition leaders and branded them as "terrorists" and "traitors." The government accused them of engaging in anti-national activities. Simultaneously, the country's economic woes continued; subsidised food items including coffee, sugar, and rice constantly disappeared as the government failed to balance the subsidies.

Unlike the previous blame game tactics, the statement on African immigrants found great resonance with popular sentiments,

and a reign of terror was unleashed between the African immigrants and the natives. According to InfoMigrants, a news agency dedicated to the issue of migration, four African migrants were attacked in the city of Sfax; similar incidents followed in other parts of Tunisia. Many of them were evicted by their landlords and were asked to return to "Africa." According to the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, around 1,540 African immigrants were arrested, and the process continues to the date. Many of the legal residents and UNHCR-registered asylum seekers were arrested without any valid charges. Many registered asylum seekers faced incidents of xenophobia and racism. For instance, on 27 February, a 17-year-old UNHCR-registered Cameroonian asylum seeker was evicted by his landlord and attacked by gangsters. The media, which is currently under strict state surveillance, has been portraying immigrants as criminals and a threat to Tunisian society.

Although a large population sides with the president's views on African immigrants, the minority section involving prominent civil society activists, migrants and

refugee protection organizations strongly support the victims. Individuals including Saadia Mosbah and Romdhaane Ben Amor have openly spoken against the propagation of European far-right white conspiracy theories and the rapid increase of xenophobic crimes in the country.

What does it mean?

Tunisia has a population of 12 million, and migrants from non-Maghreb African countries comprise only 21,000. The remarks by President Saied seems to be a distraction tactic on the backdrop of prolonging political instability, economic crisis and administrative failures. The damage control statements by the president and other officials failed to solve the crisis as the immigrants sent distress calls to their countries of origin to rescue them. While Guinea has already airlifted some of its citizens and began repatriation, the Ivory Coast and Nigeria are ensuring their citizens' safety. However, it is still unclear how these countries, suffering from a barrage of issues of their own, will repatriate the 21,000 Sub-Saharan immigrants settled in Tunisia.

AFRICA IN BRIEF

8 March-14 March

By Anu Maria Joseph and Apoorva Sudhakar

ETHIOPIA

Somali regional state denies allegations of supporting Somaliland

On 10 March, Ethiopia's Somali regional state denied the allegations of supporting the self-declared Somaliland by sending regional troops in the restive Las Anod region. State owned Somali Regional TV (SRTV) quoted the regional government: "We are telling the Somaliland administration that there are no DDS (Ethiopia's Somali regional state) troops who are part of the violence in Las Anod." The regional government denounced the allegations as "reckless" adding that Somaliland was "seeking to reduce political pressure by pointing fingers at non-existing enemies." The officials also warned the Somaliland authorities on the comment that it could create hostilities between respective communities. ("Ethiopia region denies supporting Somalia clashes," *BBC*, 10 March 2023)

SOMALIA

13 men executed in semi-autonomous Puntland

On 8 March, BBC reported that 13 men were executed in Somalia's semi-autonomous Puntland region. Nine of them belonged to Islamist militant groups Al-Shabab and Islamic State; six were former soldiers accused of murder. Meanwhile, human rights groups say the number of executions has significantly increased in Somalia. ("Soldiers and militants executed in Somali region," *BBC*, 8 March 2023)

KENYA

Currency crisis beyond governments control, says trade minister

On 9 March, Kenya's trade minister said that currency shortage in the country is beyond governments' control. He called

for incentives that would encourage local manufacturers to protect them from foreign competitors. A local media outlet reported that the Central Bank of Kenya (CBK) has directed commercial banks to ration dollars following the shortage of currency. Economists say that tough rules in the interbank currency market by the regulator is behind the crisis. In 2022, Kenyan currency lost nine per cent against the dollar. ("Kenya's dollar shortage out of our control - minister," *BBC*, 9 March 2023)

MAURITANIA

German firm signs MoU for green energy project

On 9 March, a German firm said that it signed a Memorandum of Understanding for a USD 34 billion worth green energy project in Mauritania. The project is expected to produce up to eight million tons of hydrogen-based products annually in Mauritania. Egyptian and Emirati companies are also part of the project. The first phase of the project is due to be finished in Five years. ("German firm signs \$34bn Mauritania green energy deal," *BBC*, 9 March 2023)

SOUTH AFRICA

GDP declines by 1.3 per cent

On 8 March, BBC reported that South Africa's Gross Domestic Product decreased by 1.3 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2022. Analysts say that the decline is far more than expected and blamed the energy crisis affecting productivity. Businesses were paralysed by power disruption leaving an increase in production cost as they had to depend on contingency power. Though the South African economy grew by two per cent in 2022, it is far behind the six per cent

target. ("South Africa's economy shrinks by more than expected," *BBC*, 8 March 2023)

Court orders healthcare workers to resume work

On 13 March, the Labour Appeal Court asked the healthcare workers to call off their strike and resume their work by 14 March. The health minister said the strike had hindered the healthcare services and that it caused "untold suffering and frustrations amongst the public who desperately needed healthcare and life-saving treatment." Previously, on 12 March, the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union said: "No amount of litigation or intimidation by the government will deter us from this noble worthy cause that we have embarked on." The development comes a week after the Union announced a strike after talks with the government, regarding a wage hike, failed. ("South African court orders healthcare workers to end strike," *Al Jazeera*, 14 March 2023)

NIGERIA

At least 25 people killed in Islamist militant attack

On 10 March, BBC reported that at least 25 people were killed in an Islamist militant attack in the north-eastern Borno state. The attack is suspected to be carried out by the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) militants. The UN has condemned the attack; UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Nigeria, Matthias Schmale stated: "This deeply shocking attack is another horrific reminder of the real threats of violence and insecurity that IDPs and other people affected by more than 13 years of the non-international armed conflict in the region continue to face daily in their struggle to survive." ("At least 25 killed in Nigeria jihadist attack; UN condemns suspected Islamist attack in Nigeria," *BBC*, 10 March 2023)

INEC postpones local assembly elections

On 8 March, Nigeria's Independent National Election Commission (INEC) postponed elections for state governors and local assemblies for a week. The elections will be held on 18 March. This comes after the opposition challenged the presidential elections held last month alleging irregularities with the electronic voting system. The electoral commission said the legal challenge held up preparations and the machines would not be ready in time. ("Nigeria postpones election of state governors," *BBC*, 8 March 2023)

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Over 300,000 displaced in latest violence in the east

On 14 March, The Guardian reported the UNHCR data that over 300,000 people had been displaced due to the violence between government forces and the M23 rebel groups in eastern DRC. This brings the total number of people displaced in the violence in March 2022, to 800,000. The DRC coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said that along with the humanitarian crisis, cholera and measles outbreaks had added to the problem. The MSF coordinator termed the international response to the crisis "embarrassing." So far, only eight per cent of the UNHCR's appeal for USD 233 million has been pledged. Previously, the UNHCR spokesperson said Rwanda and Uganda had witnessed an increase in refugees from DRC since January. The spokesperson said that over 5,500 people had entered Rwanda since January, and 5,300 had fled to Uganda in the same period. (Kaamil Ahmed, "'Trail of war crimes' left by DRC rebel group as recent attacks leave 300,000 displaced," *The Guardian*, 14 March 2023; Lenin Ndebele, "Rwanda and Uganda took in more than 10 000 refugees from DRC so far this year, UNHCR says," *News24*, 10 March 2023)

MALI

Military junta postpones referendum

On 10 March, BBC reported that Mali's military junta postponed the constitutional referendum which was supposed to be a significant development to the planned civilian transition. In July 2022, ECOWAS lifted sanctions on Mali after the military promised to hold elections in February 2024. However, the correspondents commented that the decision is not surprising and that it will substantiate the suspicion on Colonel Assimi Goita wanting to prolong in power. ("Mali's military to postpone key referendum," *BBC*, 10 March 2023)

REGIONAL

Cyclone Freddy; death toll reaches 21

On 8 March, BBC reported that at least 21 people were killed following cyclone Freddy in Indian Ocean Island, Madagascar and Mozambique. The storm has become the long-lasting one on record, reaching 32 days. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) described the cyclone as meteorologically "remarkable". According to the UN, more than 160,000 people have been affected by

the storm. ("Cyclone Freddy: Rare and deadly storm to hit Mozambique again," *BBC*, 8 March 2023)

Mozambique-Malawi: Storm Freddy leaves more than 100 dead

On 13 March, The Guardian referred to a Reuters news report which said that tropical storm Freddy had claimed more than 100 lives in Mozambique and Malawi after it hit southern Africa for the second time in a month. The World Meteorological Organization said this could be the strongest and longest cyclone in the southern hemisphere. With this, the death toll from Freddy since it made a landfall in February rose to 136. In Mozambique, the chief of advocacy, communications and partnerships for UNICEF in Mozambique said the humanitarian agencies had limited capacity to deal with the large-scale disaster. ("More than 100 killed as Storm Freddy returns to Mozambique and Malawi," *The Guardian*, 13 March 2023)

About the authors

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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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