

# Carthage's Troubles

*Pierre Robert Baduel*

---

**How should we characterize the regime of Tunisian President Kais Saied since his 2021 power grab? To get a sense of what is happening “inside the country,” an edited volume provides an informed and engaged interpretation of the situation.**

---

About: Hamadi Redissi<sup>1</sup> (ed.), 2023, *Le pouvoir d'un seul* (One Person's Power), Tunis, Diwen, 308 p.

In 2011, Tunisia "opened the door" to the Arab Spring(s). But now, Carthage is ensnared. Of the many scholarly and journalistic studies of Tunisia written between 2011 and 2023, I shall emphasize *Le pouvoir d'un seul*, which deals with the period after July 25, 2021--a new political turning point for Tunisia. The book is a project of the Tunisian Observatory for a Democratic Transition (Observatoire tunisien de la transition démocratique, or OTTD), a civil society "research community" created in 2011 by a handful of pro-democracy and human-rights activists. It includes contributions by seventeen authors (political scientists, legal scholars, sociologists, demographers, economists, and journalists). It is also an original book, blending two approaches to writing, one oriented towards knowledge, with its own set of rules, and one focused on public advocacy, which is subject to a scholarly and social "ethic of responsibility. Knowing from whence this book speaks, we shall consider the "representation" of Tunisia's situation that arises from the words of this collection of Tunisian intellectuals.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hamadi Redissi is a political scientist and Islamologist. He is the author of *L'exception islamique* (Paris, Seuil, 2004); *La tragédie de l'islam moderne* (Paris, Seuil, 2011); *L'islam incertain. Révolutions et islam post-autoritaire* (Tunis, Cérès, 2017).

## **A stymied transition**

*Le pouvoir d'un seul* belongs to a series of books by the OTTD, including the 2021 volume, *Tunisie, la transition bloquée* (Tunisia: The Stymied Transition, edited by Hamadi Redissi et al (20 authors, Diwen). The latter assessed what had transpired in the decade between 2011 and 2021. In his introduction, Redissi summarized the volume's conclusion. 1) "We did not go from transition to consolidation ... Nor do we find ourselves under neo-authoritarianism, a hybrid regime born in the wake of unsuccessful transitions .... In fact, the transition has been stymied ... Even a regression cannot be ruled out..." 2) The country witnessed "the emergence of a populist menace that threatens the Tunisian state and nascent democracy." Tracing the initial "obstruction of transition" back to 2017 (that is, the presidency of Beji Caid Essebsi), Redissi, in 2021, denounced "an oligarchy of *parvenus* who are indifferent to the national interest and alienated from the people," concluding that "no actor merits consideration." Mohamed Sahbi Khalifaoui denounced "the incompetence of the ruling political class over the past ten years." According to Salsabil Klibi, the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP), became, under President Essebsi, a "centrifugal force" that heavily impacted the 2019 election results. Mohamed Chafik Sarsar called attention to a "degradation" of the presidency as an institution, the consequence of which was major governmental instability, under Essebsi as well as President Saied. By narrowing the focus to the period between October 2019 and July 2021, the new book can examine, as Klibi explains, both the "unprecedented institutional situation characterized by parliament's inability to function due to its own political fragmentation," and the conflict pitting the president against the head of government and the ARP president (and Ennahda party leader) Rached Ghannouchi. Preferring "immobility, even when it further poisoned the situation, rather than exercising his role as a mediator and guarantor of the state's continuity," Saied, with the support of many voters but lacking a party, opted to "obstruct the proper functioning of institutions."

## **How to characterize the power grab?**

Klibi retraces the events leading to the power grab. "On the evening of July 25, 2021, the presidency transmitted live, on Facebook, a meeting between the president and top military and internal security officials, which he concluded with the

declaration of a state of exception, consistent with article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution." A constitutional coup d'état with the support of the military and internal security forces? His invocation of article 80, which relates to an "imminent threat," raised doubts: was Tunisia really facing such a threat on July 25, 2021? Borrowing from Latin American discourse, Redissi prefers the term *auto-coup-d'État* (*autogolpe*), to refer to a coup by a sitting head of state.

Was July 25, 2021, Saied's December 2, 1851? Ceasing to be president after he abolished the republic, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte declared himself emperor a year later. Saied did not abolish the republic but the 2014 constitution, which had made him president and preserved the presidential role. As Sana Ben Achour notes, Saied kept the "dying 2014 constitution on life support to legitimate and prolong [his] presidential term." Consequently, as the constitutional scholar Amine Mahfoudh observes, "nothing at present authorizes the president to govern the country." Other than a handful of political opponents and lawyers, who cared at the time? Did "a large of swathe of secular and progressive public opinion ... support the July 25, 2021, power grab under the pretext that it removed the Muslim Brotherhood from the political realm" (as Ben Achour puts it)?

## **What was the power grab's purpose?**

In 2021, in *Tunisie, la transition bloquée*, Ziyed Krichen recalled that Saied embraced the idea that there had been a break between the initial "insurrectional" moment (between December 17, 2010, and January 14, 2011), which was dominated by marginalized populations, and the subsequent "revolutionary" moment, which was controlled by centrist "elites." Over the course of 2011, the latter gradually distanced themselves from the people and even betrayed them. Because of this situation, Saied proposed a specific electoral program: to give the popular insurrectional movement a new "political horizon" and reverse the "pyramid of representation." Krichen adds that in early 2021, once Saied had won the presidency, he abandoned this program. In fact, later events show that he was waiting for the right moment to implement it. Krichen maintains that in 2023, Saied's project bore the imprint of "councilist ideology": "since it cannot exercise power collectively, the people must assign councils this responsibility through elections in small districts, in which elected representatives would become the quasi-direct emanations of the voters' will." This reference to "councilism" needed greater theoretical explanation, particularly since, given the

concept's leftist origins, it seemed hard to reconcile with Saied's conservative image. Or is Saied "neither right nor left" (as Hamadi Redissi suggests<sup>2</sup>)?

## "De-democratization"?

"De-democratization" is a concept coined by Charles Tilly which, at a time when the doxa of "democratic transition" is being called into question, political scientists have borrowed to analyze recent populist movements at a global level.<sup>3</sup> Salsabil Klibi analyzes Saied's political brand from the standpoint of "de-democratization." Ben Achour, for his part, examines the "*modus operandi* [pursued by Saied] of reversing the constitutional order and *pluri-constitutionality*," as the country oscillated, after July 25, 2021, "between ... [different] constitutional registers, the most astonishing of which was constituent power," mixing and matching bits and pieces of previous constitutions (going back to ancient Carthage) to establish his personal power. The result? A systematic "unravelling" of government institutions (the Supreme Judiciary Council, the Supreme Independent Election Authority, the Electoral Code, and so on). What about the "civil" character of the state, according to the 2014 constitution, and hence of the role of Islam? The 2022 constitution replaces the concept of a "state bound by the rule of law" with that of a "state *and society* bound by the rule of law." While Islam is not the state religion, it is society's religion. Several authors single out article 5 of the 2022 constitution, which, as Hafidha Chekir argues, "makes it the exclusive responsibility of the state to preserve the state, property, liberty, and religion on the basis of Islam's ends. This article provides an opening to the introduction of sharia as the basis of government and thus as a source of legislation." The califate is, according to Asma Nouira, the political model Saied endorses. Klibi concludes: "The 2022 constitution is the revenge of executive power and particularly the president--not as an institution, but as a political predator."

---

<sup>2</sup> See Hamadi Redissi and al., 2020, *La tentation populiste. Les élections de 2019 en Tunisie*, Cérès éditions 2d edition 2022.

<sup>3</sup> They might have cited, for instance, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, 2008, *Politiques du conflit. De la grève à la révolution*, Presses de SciencesPo; Alain Dieckhoff, Christophe Jaffrelot, and Elise Massicard, 2019, *Populismes au pouvoir*, Presses de SciencesPo.

## Populism without the people?

After his election as president, with 18.4% in the first round and 72.7% in the runoff, multiple polls indicated how Saied was viewed politically. He seems to enjoy enduring popularity. Yet there is a paradoxical disconnect between the high levels of satisfaction expressed in polls and a very different measure--other consultations that Saied has organized. To prepare the new constitution, the president requested electronic feedback on several questions. Turnout was low (534,915 participants, according to unverifiable data). Saied blamed it on an "invisible hand" undermining "the people's will" (according to Sana Oueschtati Hamani). The new constitution, which (as Klibi puts it) was the outcome of a "solitary marathon," the new constitution was submitted to the people as a referendum: 94.6% of voters approved it, but they represented only 30% of eligible voters. Elections to the ARP in December 2022 and January 2023 brought out only 11.2% of eligible voters in the first round and 11.4% for candidates who made it to a runoff. Was this a scathing rejection of the regime? According to Hafedh Chekir, the country went from a "democratic void to a political void," which benefited "local lobbies, prevaricators, and familial and tribal clans..."

## Unusual power at an unusual moment?

Is the "decay" of mysticism into politics, which Charles Péguy famously lamented, a universal law? In the exercise of power, what role does the "mystique of the people" promoted by Saied offer the people, practically speaking? In early 2023, Redissi still described Saied's rule as "personal power ... that is *sui generis*, unprecedented, and a work in progress--*in statu nascendi*." In an interview with the radio station France Culture on October 24, 2023, he described the regime as occupying "populist terrain situated at the border of democracy and authoritarianism." Making less of a concession to the need, on the part of intellectuals, to "express oneself metaphorically to as not to upset public opinion" (as Redissi puts it), Ben Achour has concluded that there is "no limit that can stop [President Saied] in his frantic race to acquire absolute power." A plot against the state by eight opposition figures has been uncovered (on December 29 2022), regime opponents have been intimidated (like Ahmed Nejib Chebbi), and political officials have been arrested (about twenty, including Rached Ghannouchi and Abir Moussi), and the head of government was suddenly fired and replaced (on August 2, 2023). On December 24, 2023, local elections

were held that were intended to "rebuild and complete" the institutions described in the 2022 constitution. Turnout for these elections was 11.8%!

I will conclude with two observations.

First, the volume prioritizes the analysis of domestic policy, over which citizens are presumed to have control, in contrast to international affairs. Yet a broader understanding would seem to require seeing the advent and growth of Saiedism as related contextually (i.e., "rendered possible" by) to the vast challenge to the world "order" that has prevailed since the Second World War: the crisis of the model of representative and constitutional democracy, even in "old" democracies; the multiplication of conflict zones (ISIS in Syria and Iraq, 2014-2017; the "chaos" in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Libya; the Russo-Ukrainian War since 2014); the globalization of the phenomenon of populism and its rise to power; and declining French influence in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>4</sup> Krichen notes, in passing, that Saied contemplated the "yellow vest moment" and democratic fatigue in France.

2. Since the book's audience is primarily Tunisian citizens, it would be a mistake to evaluate it in light of the vast scholarly literature on Tunisia (and the Arab world) that has been produced since 2011. That said, foreign "educated readers" will find in the volume rich access to a segment of the Tunisian intelligentsia. It will be up to them to find further enlightenment elsewhere.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 12 February 2024. Translated by Michael C. Behrent, with the support of Cairn.info, and published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 25 March 2025

---

<sup>4</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, 2018, *How Democracies Die*, Penguin Random House; Marcel Gauchet, 2021, *Macron, les leçons d'un échec*, Stock ; Pierre-Jean Luizard, 2022, *Les racines du chaos: Irak, Syrie, Liban, Yémen, Libye, cinq États arabes en faillite*, Taillandier; Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot, 2022, *Le déclassé français, les secrets d'une guerre d'influence stratégique*, Michel Lafon.