



Tunisia's Democratic Transition: the EU's Engagement and Local Politics

Executive Summary

Tunisia's 2011 revolution marked a significant transition, dismantling Ben Ali's authoritarian regime and fostering new democratic institutions. Early EU involvement focused on supporting elections, building institutional capacity, and backing human rights reforms. However, post-2014, Tunisia faced increased political fragmentation, socioeconomic difficulties, and growing citizen discontent with democratic processes, challenges exacerbated by limited EU resources and the complex political context. Since July 21, 2021, and President Kais Saied's power grab, Tunisia has been facing new challenges and controversies.

The EU played a critical role in Tunisia's early democratic transition, providing financial, technical, and institutional support. This involvement included assistance in election processes, backing for civil society organisations, and guidance in judicial and parliamentary reforms. Over time, the EU's focus shifted towards pragmatic concerns such as migration control, economic stability, and counterterrorism, which many Tunisians viewed as compromising on democratic values. EU responses to recent authoritarian shifts, particularly under President Kais Saied, were perceived as muted and inconsistent, contrasting with robust support for Eastern European nations. This has led to a sense of EU complicity in Tunisia's democratic regression, notably in recent agreements emphasising security and migration control.

Tunisian civil society, empowered by EU initiatives, initially played a vital role in advocating for democracy and human rights. However, recent authoritarian measures have marginalised these groups, limiting their influence. Focus groups released for this report revealed a perception of EU support as conditional and misaligned with Tunisian priorities, with citizens feeling EU actions prioritised strategic interests over genuine democratic support. Tunisia's experience highlighted a disparity between the EU's high ideals and practical applications, viewed by many as a selective approach. Moreover, recent EU policies emphasise migration control over democratic principles, with agreements (such as the 2021 Memorandum) prioritising Tunisia's role in curbing irregular migration. This focus has raised concerns about the EU's true commitment to democratic ideals in Tunisia. The EU's involvement in Tunisia has been instrumental but fraught with challenges. As Tunisia's political landscape faces increasing authoritarian pressures, the EU's role remains complex and, at times, controversial.