

## Tunisia's 2024 presidential elections

In a decree issued on 1 July, Tunisian President Kais Saied called a presidential election for 6 October 2024. In doing so Saied is setting himself up for probable re-election, as all but one of the opposition candidates are in prison or have been declared ineligible by the Tunisian electoral commission. A third candidate who had been approved by the electoral commission was handed a 20-month prison sentence on 19 September. Now seeking re-election for a second 5-year term, Saied was first elected to office in 2019 as an anti-establishment candidate promising to root out corruption and address poverty. He took full control of the country in 2021, dismissing the elected parliament and deciding to rule by decree, a move the opposition and international community slammed as a coup. A new constitution, approved by referendum in 2022, established a presidential system and paralysed parliament. The EU is now facing a dilemma as to how to support internal democratic processes and advance implementation of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which prioritises measures against irregular migration.

### Current situation

#### Repression of political opposition

On 11 August, Tunisia's electoral commission (whose members were [appointed](#) by presidential decree in 2022), said it had accepted the candidacies of Kais Saied and two other [candidates](#), Zouhair Magzhaoui, Secretary-General of the People's Movement political party, who is seen as a close ally of Saied, and former member of parliament and businessman Ayachi Zammel, chair of the Azimoun party. The electoral commission rejected 14 other candidates, including prominent politicians and personalities such as Mondher Znaïdi, Imed Daimi, Abdel Latif Mekki, Karim Gharbi, Kamel Akrouf and Nizar Chaari, as the interior ministry had refused to provide them with the criminal record details required by law as a new condition to run for election. Another candidate, Safi Said, [withdrew](#), describing the elections as a 'one-man show'. Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, president of the National Salvation Front uniting the main opposition parties, including the Islamic movement [Ennahda](#) and the Democratic Progressive Party, denounced the 'electoral farce' and [confirmed](#) back in April that the Salvation Front would not be presenting a presidential candidate.

On 19 September, signalling further pressure on Tunisia's political opposition, a court in Jendouba [sentenced](#) Ayachi Zammel to 20 months in prison, for falsifying voter signatures on his candidacy documents. Zammel faces more than 20 charges in jurisdictions throughout Tunisia, but claims the fraud charges are politically motivated. Zammel's attorney has stated that Zammel will conduct his campaign from behind bars. Zammel is one of a long list of Saied's opponents who have faced criminal charges and prosecution in the period leading up to October's election.

In August, courts [sentenced](#) two other candidates, Tunisian radio and television presenter Nizar Chaari and rapper Karim Gharbi, better known as K2Rhym, on similar signature [fraud charges](#). Furthermore, after a court required Tunisia's election authority to reinstate three candidates who had been ruled ineligible to run, one of them, Abdel Latif Mekki, was arrested on charges stemming from a 2014 murder investigation, charges critics have called politically motivated.

There are currently some 20 [political prisoners](#) in Tunisia. Saied's two most prominent critics, the right-wing Free Destourian Party's Abir Moussi and the Islamist party Ennahda's [Rached Ghannouchi](#), former Speaker of the Assembly of People's Representatives, have been in prison since last year on charges of glorifying terrorism. The authorities have also banned meetings at all offices of the Ennahda and closed the National Salvation Front's headquarters.

Restrictive laws and abusive legal prosecutions have combined with increased surveillance and regular intimidation to create a climate of fear throughout the country. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), human rights violations are ongoing, the repression of political opponents is intensifying, and the authoritarian drift is annihilating the possibility of holding of free and fair elections.



## Political context

Elected President on [13 October 2019](#), Kais Saied has been under domestic and international pressure since 25 July 2021, when he [dismissed](#) the country's prime minister, suspended the Assembly of People's Representatives and assumed executive authority with the army's help. He also suspended most of the Tunisian constitution, stating that he would rule by decree during an 'exceptional emergency period' with no set end date. He referred to Article 80 of the 2014 [Tunisian constitution](#), which allows sweeping powers when there is 'imminent danger threatening the nation's institutions'.

A year later, following a [constitutional referendum](#) on 25 July 2022, a [new constitution](#) was approved by 94.6 % of voters. However, as the opposition had boycotted the vote, the electoral commission estimated turnout at only 27.5 %. The main opposition Islamic party, [Ennahda](#), called for a boycott of both the referendum and the parliamentary elections (announced for 2022, first round, and 2023, second round) and assured the Tunisian public of its commitment to the 2014 constitution.

## Parliamentary and local elections 2022-2023

Tunisia held [run-off elections](#) on 29 January 2023 (the first round was held on 17 December 2022) for a parliament stripped of its powers by Saied in 2021. Saied's critics saw the [11.2% turnout](#) (of 9.1 million registered voters) as a rejection of his policies. The opposition, mainly Ennahda but also civil society representatives, such as Tunisia's largest trade union, accused Saied of attempting to silence his opponents. The election results were [announced](#) on 4 March 2023. There were 154 members elected (including 25 women) of whom 115 had joined the following six parliamentary blocs: Voice of the Republic: 25; National Independent Bloc: 21; Honesty and Labour: 20; Free Bloc: 19; National Sovereign Line: 15 and People's Triumph: 15. The parliament [elected](#) Brahim Bouderbala, a close ally of Saied, as its new speaker. The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for 31 December 2027. On 24 December 2023, for the first time since the constitutional reform, Tunisian voters [elected](#) 2 155 members of 279 local councils for a 5-year term.

## Socio-economic situation

Tunisia is facing a public finance crisis, as the pandemic and climate change have aggravated years of economic stagnation and political infighting. In 2023, Tunisia recorded a government budget deficit equal to 7.10 % of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and growth rate of only 0.4 %. High [unemployment](#), at around 16 %, is affecting young people and the southern regions in particular. Social tensions are heightened by the presence of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa using Tunisia as a transit country. Signed on 16 July 2023, the [EU-Tunisia MoU](#) promised some €900 million in macroeconomic support and [€150 million](#) in direct budgetary support. The MoU's implementation has however been [criticised](#) as slow and inefficient, not least since irregular migratory flows have risen since it was signed. The Italian Interior Ministry [published](#) data showing that 6 weeks after the MoU was signed, irregular migrant arrivals in Italy from Tunisia were 68.6 % higher than in the 6 weeks previously.

## Position of the European Parliament

The European Parliament [resolution](#) of 14 March 2024 on the adoption of the special measure in favour of Tunisia for 2023 criticised the European Commission and its use of an urgent written procedure – bypassing parliamentary oversight – for the disbursement of the special measure of €150 million under the EU-Tunisia MoU. Parliament also expressed doubt that fundamental principles in external action relating to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as outlined in [Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union](#), were being upheld given the significant deterioration in fundamental rights seen in Tunisia since July 2021.

Parliament's [resolution](#) of 16 March 2023 reiterated concerns about Saied's authoritarian drift and his instrumentalisation of Tunisia's socio-economic situation to reverse the country's democratic transition. It also called for the immediate release of Noureddine Boutar and other political prisoners who have been arbitrarily detained.

Earlier, Parliament's [resolution](#) of 21 October 2021 on the situation in Tunisia reaffirmed its commitment to the privileged partnership between the EU and Tunisia, and to Tunisia's democratic process. It also expressed deep concern that Presidential Decree 2021-117 had established the indefinite concentration of powers in President Saied's hands. Parliament called on the Tunisian authorities to abide by the constitution and to ensure that the fundamental rights of all citizens were upheld.