

Tunisia Can “Bounce Back” from Authoritarianism with Proper Support

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May 16, 2023

Also published in Just Security

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Articles & Testimony

Other countries that have restored democratic norms in recent years have seen progress in five distinct areas.

Since July 2021, when Tunisia’s democratically elected president unilaterally launched a series of measures to consolidate power in his own hands, U.S. and Western policymakers have grown increasingly perplexed about how to restore democracy in that country. After instituting a decade-long transition process that saw enhanced civil liberties; multiple rounds of free and fair elections; and the elaboration of an exceptionally progressive constitution, President Kais Saied has dismantled almost all those gains in less than two years. Yet a global perspective on democratization shows that such “backsliding” can be reversed, and that the international community can play a significant role in assisting such reversals. The [Varieties of Democracy \(https://v-dem.net/\)](https://v-dem.net/) (V-Dem) Project, which seeks to measure democracy globally, identified eight countries in 2022 that “bounced back” from authoritarianism after having previously made democratic gains. A closer look at these cases can be instructive in crafting responses to the Tunisian case.

Common Elements of “Bounce Back” and Their Application in Tunisia

Five elements unite the eight cases of “bounce back” from autocratization. Although not every element was present in all eight cases, and although no single element was responsible for reversing autocratization in any country, together these five factors suggest areas for democracy supporters inside and outside Tunisia to focus on.

The first element is *large-scale popular mobilization against the incumbent*. For instance, major protests in South Korea in 2016 and Moldova in 2014—both sparked by corruption scandals—triggered institutional actions that ultimately forced the autocrat out of power. In Tunisia, large-scale popular mobilization has been a catalyst for democratization in the past. But today, several barriers hamper such mobilization. Even the Tunisian General Workers' Union (UGTT), the country's largest organization, hasn't managed to organize protests that can pressure the president to initiate a dialogue, due to internal splits (<https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/cuny/cp/2022/00000054/00000003/art00004>) and lack of a unifying agenda (<https://timep.org/2023/03/22/ugtts-salvation-initiative-saving-tunisia-or-saving-themselves/>). Notably, opposition demonstrations have taken place even though they are legal only with official approval. Protestors have also on occasion defied bans (<https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Politics/16056033-governor-of-tunis>) and use of force (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-protests-police-crackdown-revolution-anniversary>) by authorities. This could potentially represent a tiny window of hope: as long as Saied's opponents retain this avenue for expression, they might succeed in preventing more damage from being done and in buying themselves time to build new pathways of resistance.

The second element is *unified opposition coalescing with civil society*. In North Macedonia, for example, a parliamentary boycott in 2015 against the autocratic ruling party of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's state capture organized by a lead opposition party allowed the latter to deepen its social ties with youth and other activists. This in turn helped enlarge the opposition party's voter base and ultimately led to the election in 2016 of a new pro-democracy government. Unfortunately, the potential for opposition political parties and civil society actors to coalesce in Tunisia—despite the country's experience (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/tunisia-s-national-dialogue-quartet-set-powerful-example>) with such cooperation—remains weak. Saied remains a deeply polarizing figure who has taken advantage of existing political and social divisions to incapacitate his opponents. To date, the UGTT and some opposition political parties refuse to work with the main Islamist party, Ennahda, which has lost support due to its perceived incompetence and corruption while in government. Such underlying divisions remain a key barrier to resisting autocratization.

The third factor is *elections*. In Ecuador, results of local-level elections demonstrated lack of support for the party of the autocratizing President Rafael Correa and ultimately allowed his vice president, Lenin Moreno, to take over and institute a series of democratizing reforms. Moreno's takeover was facilitated by the ruling party's attempt to secure power by removing term limits starting after Correa stepped down for a term, in response to the outcome of local elections. Moreno's moves to reintroduce checks and balances in the interim therefore caught Correa off guard.

Recent elections in Tunisia—a constitutional referendum in July 2022 and two rounds of parliamentary elections in December 2022 and January 2023—produced abysmally low (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/low-voter-turnout-in-tunisian-elections-casts-doubt-on-future-parliaments-legitimacy>) voter turnout. Explanations for these high levels of voter abstinence include an overwhelming preoccupation with economic concerns, a restricted legal framework for elections designed by Saied, and the stakes of the elections (for example, under the new constitution, the powers of parliament are significantly reduced). Widespread disillusionment (<https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/AB7-Tunisia-Report-EN.pdf>) with politicians and political parties and a boycott by some—but not all—opposition figures also contributed. Clearly, for a decisive election to occur in Tunisia, voters' faith in democratic politics will need to be restored.

The fourth factor is *judiciary reversing executive takeover*. In Moldova, for example, constitutional court rulings helped protect the holding of free and fair elections from attempts by the ruling party to block them, ultimately giving the democratic opposition a majority in parliament. Judicial independence in Tunisia has historically been weak, but steps taken to address this since the authoritarian overthrow in 2011, along with sustained activism

among some magistrates against Saied's attempts to subordinate the judiciary to the executive, are indicative of the role the judicial sector could play over the long term. While Saied has called on the [police \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/executive-versus-judiciary-tunisia\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/executive-versus-judiciary-tunisia) to help advance this subordination, it is not clear [\(https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/tunisia-strengthening-security-force-unions-blunts-internal-control-35925\)](https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/tunisia-strengthening-security-force-unions-blunts-internal-control-35925) that he has full support from security forces. Any break within the executive could give momentum to the opposition. Meanwhile, elements of the judiciary continue to resist Saied's actions, using methods such as a month-long [hunger strike \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/30/tunisia-judges-hunger-strike/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/30/tunisia-judges-hunger-strike/) by magistrates and an administrative court order in August 2022 to reinstate 49 of the 57 judges whom Saied had [fired \(https://inkyfada.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022.06.01-Revocation-magistrats-Decret-loi-FR.pdf\)](https://inkyfada.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022.06.01-Revocation-magistrats-Decret-loi-FR.pdf) the previous June.

The Role of International Actors

The fifth uniting element among countries that bounced back from authoritarianism over the past 20 years is *international support*. In Bolivia, the Organization of American States (OAS) was a key player in helping nudge the country toward a democratic path following a series of anti-democratic actions beginning under President Evo Morales (2005–2019) and continuing under President Jeanine Áñez (2019–2020) and current President Luis Arce. While Bolivia still faces several challenges, including polarization and threats to judicial independence, continued attention by the international community has helped the country show marked improvement on democracy indices over the past year.

Morales undertook several anti-democratic steps in the lead-up to the 2019 elections, running for a controversial fourth term after his loyalist-packed constitutional court overrode the Bolivian people's rejection of a 2016 constitutional referendum that would have prevented him from running. Statements by OAS election [observers \(https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-085/19\)](https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-085/19) regarding improprieties and inconsistencies during the 2019 election provided a crucial counterpoint to Morales's narrative, and ultimately contributed to Morales's decision to step down and leave Bolivia in the wake of a popular uprising against him. The OAS continued to issue critical [statements \(https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-024/21#:~:text=It%20reaffirms%20the%20need%20to,Bolivia%20from%20October%202019%20onwards\)](https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-024/21#:~:text=It%20reaffirms%20the%20need%20to,Bolivia%20from%20October%202019%20onwards) calling for investigations into the violence and "crimes against humanity" committed under his successor. And despite free and fair elections bringing Arce into office, international actors, including U.S. officials, called out the Arce government's politicization of the judiciary and vengeful approach toward Áñez and her supporters. These sentiments were echoed in a *Washington Post* [editorial \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-bolivian-government-is-on-a-lawless-course-its-democracy-must-be-preserved/2021/03/18/3b816a4e-880b-11eb-8a8b-5cf82c3dffe4_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-bolivian-government-is-on-a-lawless-course-its-democracy-must-be-preserved/2021/03/18/3b816a4e-880b-11eb-8a8b-5cf82c3dffe4_story.html) in March 2021.

The United States has had a less influential role than the OAS, particularly since the Bolivian government expelled the U.S. ambassador in 2008 and kicked USAID out of the country in 2013. However, in FY2018 the United States spent nearly half of its \$1.8 million foreign assistance package on support for government and civil society and provided an additional \$5 million to support the 2020 elections. Those numbers fell dramatically in FY2022, when the United States provided only \$275,800 in assistance for government and civil society, signaling less of a commitment to this sector.

In Ecuador, Moreno's election as president in 2017 was expected to be a continuation of his predecessor's administration, as Moreno was Correa's vice president. But Moreno quickly broke with Correa and began rolling back some of his predecessor's anti-democratic actions by reinstating presidential term limits, taking steps to restore judicial independence, and working to address polarization. However, Moreno faced his own corruption

allegations in 2019 and did not run for reelection in 2021. While Moreno's reforms did not fully return Ecuador to a democratic path, and he left office with an extremely low approval rating, his actions were rewarded by the United States with significant financial and diplomatic support. Following the reinstatement of the USAID mission in Quito in 2020, the United States and Ecuador **signed (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-ecuador/>)** an agreement for a \$62.5 million grant to support democracy, governance, and environmental projects in Ecuador over five years. And in fiscal year 2021, the United States provided Ecuador with \$4.13 million in support for government and civil society.

The United States also showed its support for Ecuador's democratic progress with visits by U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield in May 2021 to attend the inauguration of Moreno's successor, President Guillermo Lasso, and by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in October 2021. And in May 2022, First Lady Jill Biden visited Ecuador and met with Lasso, his wife, and various civil society organizations with a specific focus on strengthening democracy in Latin America. During her visit, Biden **applauded (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/05/19/remarks-by-first-lady-jill-biden-in-ecuador/>)** Ecuador's progress.

North Macedonia strayed from the democratic path under Gruevski (2006–2016). Opposition figures accused Gruevski's government of numerous abuses and corruption, triggering a widespread political crisis in 2015. The United States and the European Union played a key role in returning North Macedonia to a democratic path by brokering the 2015 Przino Agreement, which led to early elections in 2016, and the two international actors intervened repeatedly throughout the following year to help defuse tensions. The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) Party, which ran on a reform platform and pledged to implement a reform agenda backed by the EU, prevailed in the parliamentary elections in 2016. While many of the reforms have yet to come to fruition, North Macedonia has shown positive signs in addressing the political instability of the past decade.

One of the factors that analysts have pointed to as aiding North Macedonia's bounce-back is the two large carrots of NATO and EU membership. North Macedonia joined NATO in 2020 and began the EU accession process, although the EU accession process has faced several hurdles including vetoes by France and Bulgaria. While the European Union is North Macedonia's largest donor and partner, the United States has a defense partnership with North Macedonia and contributes significantly to North Macedonia's political and economic reform efforts. Over one-third of U.S. assistance to North Macedonia is for government and civil society (\$7,708,000 million out of \$19,670,240 total bilateral assistance in FY22), with the goal of supporting reforms necessary for full EU accession.

Zambia also experienced a turn toward autocracy following the election of President Edgar Lungu in 2014, as the Lungu government oversaw attacks on opposition figures and freedom of expression. U.S. and European pressure, coupled with a strong pro-democracy civil society movement, helped return Zambia to democratic rule. The 2021 presidential elections were a major turning point for Zambia, with opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema defeating Lungu. While the election was marred by violence and initially contested by Lungu, he eventually stepped down.

The U.S. government played a key role in pressuring Lungu to abide by the election results, threatening sanctions, travel bans and visa restrictions on those who instigated election violence. The African Union's election observer mission also made clear that Lungu's complaints regarding electoral fraud had no bearing. And the European Union **called out (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/zambia-technically-well-managed-electoral-process-marred-unequal-campaign-conditions_en)** the election for "abuse of incumbency," noting "selective application of laws and regulations, misuse of state resources and one-sided media reporting meant that a level playing field was not achieved."

The United States has continued to **applaud (<https://www.state.gov/zambia-independence-day/>)** and highlight Zambia's democratic steps. In FY22, the United States provided Zambia with \$9.7 million in governance and civil

society support. During the 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, Hichilema received significant administration attention and signed multiple deals with U.S. public and private sector entities. Zambia was also selected to co-host the 2023 Summit for Democracy and Vice President Kamala Harris [visited \(https://www.npr.org/2023/03/24/1165609421/vice-president-harris-is-visiting-africa-next-week-part-of-a-pushback-to-china\)](https://www.npr.org/2023/03/24/1165609421/vice-president-harris-is-visiting-africa-next-week-part-of-a-pushback-to-china) Zambia in March 2023.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is no question that local popular support for democracy is a necessary condition for a return to a democratic path. Without a unified opposition to mobilize against an authoritarian incumbent and an independent elections commission and other such institutions to act as guardrails, no amount of international pressure will be sufficient to reverse the authoritarian drift.

Moreover, other [research \(https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202303-Carothers_Feldman_BrightSpots.pdf\)](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202303-Carothers_Feldman_BrightSpots.pdf) on “democratic bright spots” suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting countries at risk of authoritarian backsliding. International support is particularly tricky in Tunisia currently, where the president’s populist rhetoric about “foreign interference”—and even some cases of apparent [arrests \(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/03/25/tunisia-criminalizes-contacts-with-western-diplomats_6020576_124.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/03/25/tunisia-criminalizes-contacts-with-western-diplomats_6020576_124.html) of individuals for having met with foreign diplomats—has helped create a climate of fear. Nonetheless, targeted international involvement can clearly make a difference in cases of democratization that are at risk, [illustrating \(https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/05/04/how-united-states-can-and-should-continue-to-support-tunisia-pub-89681\)](https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/05/04/how-united-states-can-and-should-continue-to-support-tunisia-pub-89681) why abandoning Tunisia at this critical stage is more likely to lead to further backsliding.

In particular, Tunisians’ fight for judicial independence, as well as media and other freedoms that can help expose corruption, will rely on moral and operational support from the international human rights community. Under former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, such ties between international and Tunisian human rights activists were critical in fighting for democratic reform. In addition, quiet influence from Tunisia’s international military partners—the U.S. military is [close \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/world/africa/us-tunisia-terrorism.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/world/africa/us-tunisia-terrorism.html) to Tunisian security forces and is thought to be [particularly influential \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636412.2022.2065925?journalCode=fsst20\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636412.2022.2065925?journalCode=fsst20) and rewarded Tunisia with Major Non-NATO Ally status in 2015—could conceivably discourage other disputed practices such as the use of military courts to try civilians. This in turn would send a signal to Saied that he cannot count on the military to support him as he plows ahead with his project of one-man rule.

A growing number of international actors have [called \(https://www.reuters.com/world/italy-pushing-imf-help-tunisia-avoid-instability-minister-says-2023-03-19/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/italy-pushing-imf-help-tunisia-avoid-instability-minister-says-2023-03-19/) for intervention to help prevent Tunisia’s economy from a collapse. The international community has learned the hard way that neglect for Tunisia’s economy will undermine even the most valiant democracy promotion efforts. Going forward, it will be important for the United States and other external actors to balance their support for Tunisia’s most vulnerable, such as through continued economic assistance and support for pro-democracy actors, with diplomatic efforts to isolate Saied to ensure that any assistance does not inadvertently strengthen Saied’s hand.

A final factor implied in the V-Dem findings important for bouncing back is what some [research \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413) calls “democratic stock,” or developing strong democratic institutions over time. Tunisia’s experience with democratic rule is extremely limited, putting it at a disadvantage. Additionally, no unifying and democratic alternative ruler behind which Tunisians could rally can emerge overnight to halt autocratization, given Tunisia’s deep economic challenges and societal and political divisions. Until conditions allow for the right combination of elements to help the country reverse course,

the United States and the international community must use consistent, behind-the-scenes support to make sure Tunisia does not sink deeper into autocratization. This should be done in coordination with non-Western actors such as the African Union and should be reinforced by rhetoric that condemns anti-democratic actions.

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RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Another Round of Negotiations with the Houthis: AQAP as Potential Spoiler in Yemen

May 16, 2023

Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

(/policy-analysis/another-round-negotiations-houthis-aqap-potential-spoiler-yemen)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

New Saudi Opinion Poll Shows 40 Percent Still Back Some Ties with Israel; Three-Fourths Say Rocket Fire Against Israel Will Have Negative Effects

May 15, 2023

David Pollock

(/policy-analysis/new-saudi-opinion-poll-shows-40-percent-still-back-some-ties-israel-three-fourths)

الرأي والتعبير واعتناق الآراء دون مضايقة، وكذلك المادتين (١٩) و (٢٠) من العهد الدولي الخاص بالحقوق المدنية والسياسية.

واستناداً للتصاريح الممنوحة لهيئة الاعلام والاتصالات وفقاً لأحكام القسمين (١) والفقرة (٤) و(٥) للمرة ب) من الإيم (٦٤) لسنة ٢٠٠٤ بشأن تشجيع التطور في الاعلام الإلكتروني وفي شبكات الاتصالات من أجل تحقيق أكبر قدر من المتعة للمستخدمين.

واعتراضاً من الهيئة بأن الحوار والنشر العملي على تبادل المعلومات بحرية لا يتحقق إلا بتأمين جميع العراقيين من الوصول بحرية الى وسائل الاعلام الحرة المستقلة والمتنوعة المهنية.

ورغبة من الهيئة في المساهمة الفاعلة في تعزيز التشفرة والتثقيف والتنظيم والترسيخ وتعزيز الاستخدام الرقمي في كافة المجالات في جمهورية العراق عبر التعاون مع الجهات الرسمية، كذلك الرغبة الحثيثة في تحصين المجتمع والقيادات

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iraqi CMC Draft Regulation of Digital Content in Iraq

May 15, 2023

◆
Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/iraqi-cmc-draft-regulation-digital-content-iraq)

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