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### Dismantling New Democracies: The Case of Tunisia

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## Dismantling New Democracies: The Case of Tunisia

### Comments

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## **Dismantling New Democracies: The Case of Tunisia<sup>i</sup>**

For years, Tunisia was the democratic beacon in the Middle East. On July 25, 2021, President Kaïs Saïed enacted emergency measures, under the guise of an “imminent danger threatening the integrity of the country and the country’s security and independence.”<sup>ii</sup> He dismissed the prime minister and suspended parliament. Some Tunisians celebrated his announcement as responding effectively to social problems, which could be consistent with building Tunisia’s democratic future, despite the challenge they posed to electoral legitimacy. It also engendered concerns about a return to the prior authoritarian order: “President Habib Bourguiba himself started attacking his own constitution and passed constitutional reforms to concentrate power and to remain president for life. So reforms to constitutions are not necessarily the solution” to Tunisia’s problems.<sup>iii</sup> Opponents identified the self-coup as a threat to Tunisian democracy. Nonetheless, Saïed has retained control. How could a leader in a hard-won democracy abruptly dismantle it without tremendous public backlash?

Even in a democracy under stress the move was politically risky. Democratic regression risks the loss of domestic and international support; strong public opposition can lead to would-be authoritarians’ ouster. In theory, robust public support for the democratic institutions being undermined would drive protests and a return to the democratic course. However, in the Tunisian case, strategic targeting of particular institutions for reversion seems to have allowed Saïed to engage in extra-constitutional reforms while retaining power. Rather than a complete authoritarian turn, as was initially feared, Saïed seems to be promoting a liberal non-democratic structure. For instance, he appointed Tunisia’s first female prime minister, but without parliamentary approval. By maintaining popular institutions and objectives, pro-autocrats can obfuscate widespread opposition to anti-democratic acts.

This project demonstrates the opportunity for such strategic action by studying Tunisian public opinion in the weeks after Saïed's self-coup (August 2022). Looking at public opinion so close to the coup offers insight into the political environment that made such bold actions attainable. The survey was based on previous democratic attitudes studies in Egypt<sup>iv</sup> and Mexico.<sup>v</sup> It presents these results in conjunction with prior Tunisia surveys to highlight the relative popularity of certain political institutions (i.e., the rule of law) and policies (i.e., economic redistribution). Using cluster analysis, it identifies three preference profiles. Although there is a sizeable social-liberal democrat bloc, a substantial population of social-liberal non-democrats also exists in Tunisia.<sup>vi</sup> That is to say while the respondents demonstrate strong support for liberal institutions (i.e., women's political participation), commitment to election-based governance is less pervasive. The combination indicates that Saïed found space to reform the state towards his preference for a strong executive presidency without earning mass public opposition. Attacking more popular institutions, a greater violation of the public will, could still foment opposition. His conduct offers a roadmap to other would-be autocrats to undermine their own democracies.

### **Democratic Institutions in Tunisia**

Saïed openly expressed disfavour toward Tunisia's prevailing democratic model. He opposed political parties, especially as a basis of the political system, and advocated for decentralizing the government. He criticized the state as riddled with corruption. He suggested replacing party-based elections with candidate-list elections. Most strikingly, Saïed "strongly favors a presidential system instead of the current constitution's power sharing among the prime minister, parliament, and the presidency."<sup>vii</sup> These preferences are not inherently undemocratic,

though they are reminiscent of Tunisia's authoritarian past. The mechanism he chose to move in that direction *is* authoritarian.

Saïed, citing Article 80 of Tunisia's constitution, dismissed a prime minister who disagreed with his policies, removed politicians' immunity from prosecution, expanded the country's curfew, and banned demonstrations. Security forces raided the Al-Jazeera offices. Article 80 "allows the president to take necessary measures in the event of an imminent threat to the country's institutions, security, or independence" but requires coordination with the prime minister and parliament speaker; it does not allow the president to dissolve parliament.<sup>viii</sup> Thus, these actions were unconstitutional. His solution to that is to rewrite the constitution for a July 2022 referendum. Opponents argue new elections should occur before the constitutional referendum. Saïed ultimately dissolved parliament after half of the members sought to revoke his decrees.

He installed a new prime minister, although he intends to reduce the office's power. Najla Romdhane, appointed without parliamentary approval, is the first female prime minister. He touted this appointment as advancing a liberal principle – women's equality – while engaging in extra-constitutional reforms that threaten democratic governance.<sup>ix</sup> He decreed that the next elections, planned for December 2022, will change structure. There will be two rounds of voting featuring candidates, rather than party lists.<sup>x</sup> Saïed plans to exclude political parties from the constitution-drafting process. In the biggest yet show of opposition, Tunisia's major union (UGTT) called a national strike over the economy and declined to join the constitution re-writing committee<sup>xi</sup> and judges struck to protest judicial layoffs.<sup>xii</sup> Pro- and anti-regime protests continue; recent anti-Saïed demonstrations, supported by several political parties, have surpassed pro-regime demonstrations.<sup>xiii</sup> Arguing Saïed's policies undercut civil liberties,

Freedom House downgraded Tunisia from Free to Partly Free. Former-President Moncef Marzouki has declared Tunisia is no longer a democracy, however hopeful he may remain for the future.<sup>xiv</sup>

Saïed was not the only Tunisian who was fed up with the status quo. In 2018, the Arab Barometer showed that a vast majority (82.9%) were not sure the country was headed in the right direction. The economic circumstances were poor. In 2018, the Arab Barometer showed that 65.6% of Tunisians' household income did not cover their expenses and that their households faced financial difficulties; in 2021, it was 63.9%. Almost all Tunisians thought the economic situation in 2021 was (very) bad (92.3%), and 42.5% saw it getting worse in the next few years. Former-President Marzouki attributes the country's anti-democratic turn partially to the regime's failure to deliver socioeconomic gains for the people.<sup>xv</sup> In Blackman and Nugent's<sup>xvi</sup> post-coup survey, nearly 80% of respondents said they agreed more with the sentence "The president's actions hold corrupt politicians accountable and help ordinary Tunisians" than with the sentence "The president's actions undermine [*dimuqratiyya*] and threaten the rights of the Tunisian people."<sup>xvii</sup> Only 15% indicated that his actions were a greater threat than they were a boon to the public.

Tunisians did not see the democratic government as a solution to the problems. In 2021, 78.3% were (completely) dissatisfied with the government's performance, and 81% did not trust the council of ministers. Corruption was perceived as rampant. Only Lebanese respondents identified a greater extent of corruption than Tunisians did (Arab Barometer VI). This was not new. Arab Barometer V (2018) showed that Tunisians do not trust the parties in their country – 72% said they trust them "not at all" – the parliament – 65% "not at all" – or the government generally – 58% "not at all."

These attitudes created a framework for Saïed to act. As Grubman and Şaşmaz (2021) express, “In the eyes of many Tunisians, the institutions targeted by Saïed—the government, the legislature and the largest political parties—had become associated with corruption and incompetence.”<sup>xviii</sup> He was, however, constrained by what the public would tolerate. Although frustrated with their institutions, “Tunisians are well aware of the importance of their hard-won civic and political liberties.”<sup>xix</sup> That constellation leaves space in the popular will for a liberal unelected government.

## **Materials and Methods**

To identify the patterns of public sentiment during Saïed’s reforms, this project utilizes an Arabic-language survey fielded in Tunisia immediately following the self-coup (August 2-9, 2021) via YouGov’s MENA weekly omnibus panel. This online panel, which seeks to provide a gender- and age-representative sample of Tunisians,<sup>xx</sup> has been used for previous political studies in the Middle East.<sup>xxi</sup> Given the stability of attitudes over short timespans, these responses are representative of Tunisian attitudes at a moment of state anti-democratic action.

498 Tunisians answered the survey.<sup>xxii</sup> During the consent procedure respondents were informed that it was being conducted by an American university researcher and that the survey was entirely anonymous.<sup>xxiii</sup> Respondents could skip questions; 22.6% indicated “prefer not to say” to at least one question, and one respondent chose that for each item.<sup>xxiv</sup> The 77.4% complete answer rate is higher than the completion rates for similar surveys conducted in Egypt in 2020 and Mexico in 2003 and 2005.

Consistent with YouGov’s recruitment, the panel aligns with Tunisia’s population. Half are male (50.4%). MENA populations skew younger: half of the respondents are under 35, while 24.5% are 45 or older.<sup>xxv</sup> 96.6% of the respondents are Muslim, and 2.6% are non-religious. Less

than one percent of the sample is Christian (0.4%) or something else (0.4%). Almost all reported at least some education, which is not surprising given that the survey requires literacy. 82.7% completed higher education.<sup>xxvi</sup> However, the literacy rate in Tunisia is high (79%), and the school life expectancy in Tunisia is 15 years, so truncation is not a major concern.<sup>xxvii</sup> 57% describe themselves as “working.” There is also a distribution of incomes. 54.2% earn less than 533 dinar per month, while only 14.5% earned over 1066 dinar per month.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The survey-takers were given the chance to write an open-ended comment about the omnibus survey they had just taken; while most respondents wrote nothing or “thanks,” some were effusive. Respondents were eager to share their political opinions during this time, which they recognised as an important moment for Tunisia. An 18-24-year-old woman, who indicated that democracy is the best government wrote, “I was looking for someone to ask me about the government and about the country because the country is witnessing a governmental and political struggle. Thank you for this survey.” Another, a 45+ man, described it as “a survey that corresponds to what societies and countries are going through in this wide world.”

A 25-34-year-old woman (who indicated that sometimes unelected governments are best) expressed her support for the presidents’ reforms: “I know and you know that this survey intended to point to the events that happened in Tunisia to restore legitimacy and, most importantly, to return the republic to the people. For that, I want to assure you, the American government and people, Tunisia is on the right path and what happened is not a coup but rather the will of the people! If the people one day want life, then it must respond to fate!”<sup>xxix</sup> Not all the respondents were favourable towards Saïed’s reforms or their ramifications. A 45+ man wrote “the country is in crisis.” It is not to be doubted, then, that President Saïed’s actions represent a critical juncture for Tunisian democracy.



## Results and Discussion

The survey asked Tunisians about their support for many institutions and policies associated with liberal democratic governments. In a democracy, “rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives.”<sup>xxx</sup> Non-electoral institutions, such as mass participation, freedom of speech, or the rule of law, can be integrated into some conceptions.<sup>xxxi</sup> For instance, associated institutions feature in the Polyarchy scale.<sup>xxxii</sup> By considering these supportive values in separate questions from support for elected government, a more nuanced view of citizens’ structural preferences is possible.

To presage the results, it is evident that many of these structures enjoy robust support (Table 1). The electoral institutions do not have as widespread public commitment. This creates space for strategic operation.

[Table 1 here]

Only half of the respondents in August 2021 endorsed choosing the government by election as the best system of government.<sup>xxxiii</sup> More than a third outright preferred non-democracy. The support rate is only slightly lower than the 53% that Blackman and Nugent (2022) found in August 2021 when asking about *dimuqratiyya*. It is lower than the 78.8% that said *dimuqratiyya* has problems but is better than other forms of government in the 2018 Arab Barometer. In 2011, when the democracy was forming after the Arab Spring, 70.2% of Tunisians (strongly) agreed, although *dimuqratiyya* had problems, it was better than other systems; 22% were unsure.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This could indicate that the interest in *dimuqratiyya*, and, to some extent democracy itself, has declined in recent years.

This result is consistent with the 62.9% of Tunisians who said in 2020 that the country needed “a leader who can bend the rules if necessary to get things done.”<sup>xxxv</sup> In the same survey, 55.8% (strongly) agreed that “as long as the government can maintain order and stability in the country, it does not matter whether it is” *dimuqratiyya* or non-*dimuqratiyya*. These numbers alone seem to endorse Saïed’s actions, as long as the things he is getting done are the same things the public wants.

Despite this mixed support for democracy itself, many liberal institutions are well-supported. Equality of political rights polls rather well. A supermajority (84.5%) thought that women should be allowed to participate in politics. This is consistent with the large share of Tunisians (84.8%) who indicated that higher education is as important for women as men, one of the highest rates in the 2021 Arab Barometer. This is higher than the support expressed for women’s political participation in similar surveys in Egypt in 2020,<sup>xxxvi</sup> where only two-thirds of respondents endorsed women’s participation. Fewer Tunisians defended political participation by religious minorities. Less than two-thirds (60.6%) thought that they should participate in politics; 13.9% thought that they should not. This is a lower rate than the 21.5% of Tunisians who said in 2021 that non-Muslims in Muslim-majority countries should have fewer political rights than Muslims. Egyptians were more supportive of religious minority’s participation (66.2%), which could reflect the larger share of religious minorities in Egypt.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Tunisians roundly approved of the rule of law, although they take a dour look on the circumstances in Tunisia. In the 2021 Afrobarometer, 54.3% of Tunisians said that “ordinary people” who break the law rarely or never go unpunished. By contrast, only 18.4% would say the same of officials who break the law. This survey offered two options for unequal treatment of authority figures. In both cases, super-majorities expressed preferences for subjecting the clergy

(89.2%) and the laity and police (87.3%) and civilians to the same legal framework. The number of people who should be allowed to break the rules to get things done may be small, and the number who may do it for personal gain would be smaller still. This is a greater commitment to the rule of law than was identified in the 2020 Egypt survey; in that case, three-quarters would apply the same rules to the clergy and the laity and four-fifths would do so for police and civilians. Although Tunisians did not think highly of the rule of law in their country, they endorse the principle.

Most Tunisians support citizens' opportunities for political organization. Large majorities (78.4%) oppose government restrictions on free association or the right to protests for social change (82.7%). These are relatively favourable rates compared to similar surveys in Egypt in 2020<sup>xxxviii</sup> – just under two-thirds endorsed these points in Egypt – or Mexico in 2003 and 2005,<sup>xxxix</sup> where 58% and 55% respectively endorsed the freedom of association. Although Tunisians put little stock in civil society organizations – less than a third expressed trust in them in 2018, and only 5.9% were a member of one, the lowest regional rate – they want to retain the right to join them or to join with each other against the government. Such freedom would also enable them to join in support of the government; after all, both protest and counter-protest are common in Tunisia. This is consistent with the majority (59%) of Tunisians who said that citizens are not obliged to support government decisions with which they disagree.<sup>xl</sup> In the same 2018 survey, only half of the Tunisian respondents indicated that the government was guaranteeing the freedom to join associations, the second highest rate in the region; nearly as many (48.5%), the highest in the region, thought their government was guaranteeing the right to join peaceful protests.

There were cracks, however, in the publics' support for liberal values. In practice, the freedom of expression only goes so far if it is not coupled with political tolerance. Despite expressing support for equal political participation, they were not eagerly endorsing political disagreement. While a plurality (40.2%) of the sample would support someone's going on TV to share an opinion they did not endorse, fully a third would not. Two-thirds of Tunisians reported in 2020 that their country guaranteed freedom of expression to a great or medium extent; only Algeria and Morocco reported greater freedom.<sup>xlii</sup> Similarly, 60.4% of Tunisians agreed that the government guarantees the freedom for the press to criticize the government; again it was only bested by Algeria and Morocco. Although many would permit such expression, existing restrictions on these freedoms have at least some public backing. For comparison, only a third of Egyptians and only 40.7% of Mexicans were so tolerant.<sup>xliii</sup> Tunisians are thus doing well comparatively.

The public has decidedly mixed opinions on maintaining rights in a crisis. There is a near even split in the sample on whether or not the government should be allowed to treat security threats as it sees fit – including violating personal rights – in the interest of public safety. Egyptians were similarly divided on this point. This partition mirrors the finding in the 2014 Afrobarometer, in which 52.2% of Tunisians (strongly) agreed with the statement the “Government should prioritize ensuring security and fighting terrorism, even if it undermines [*dimuqratiyya*] and human rights.” This could reflect a desire for safety in a turbulent region. Even established democracies have struggled with maintaining popular support for human rights for perceived security threats, like suspected terrorists. For some citizens, this flexibility on individual rights may extend to lower thresholds of public safety, such as substantial economic

instability or high crime rates. Personal rights would not, for them, represent a bulwark against aggressive pro-social action.

Fixing the faltering economy is an important claim for would-be authoritarians. As noted, Tunisians had a very negative view of the country's economy prior to Saied's interventions. They also strongly favour an active role for the state in addressing economic problems. The vast majority (90.4%) agreed that the state should redistribute resources in society to take care of the poor. A super-majority also supported state action to limit the income gap between rich and poor Tunisians. These results place the Tunisian respondents left of the 2020 Egyptian respondents; in that case 81% and 71% respectively endorsed redistributive policies. Many MENA countries, including Tunisia, have used subsidies to protect the poor and to keep the peace.<sup>xliii</sup> Decades ago, MENA governments used large public sector employment to distribute wealth and keep unemployment lower, but it became financially untenable.<sup>xliv</sup> Generous welfare policies require the state to have resources to redistribute, which is a separate hurdle to economic redistribution. Taxation without representation is not popular – in 2018, only 21.5% of Tunisians (strongly) agreed that the “state has the right to demand that citizens pay taxes without giving them a role in important state decisions.”<sup>xlv</sup> This proportion, though, was higher than the other countries who answer the question (Morocco, Libya, and Jordan). For this segment of the population, unrepresented taxation supporting liberal policies might be a willing trade.

In addition to reviewing the direct support for these institutions, it is instructive to consider how they coalesce. The Mexico studies, for instance, identified several types of “democrats with adjectives.” Several patterns could form in young democracies: “Rather than embracing liberal-democratic principles, their citizens may flirt with authoritarian alternatives, entertain vague ideas of democracy that lack an identifiable core or harbor notions of democracy

whose core principles are incompatible with liberal democratic ideals.”<sup>xlvi</sup> The decoupling of institutional support, particularly the decoupling of support for electoral democracy from other institutions, provides space for non-democratic actors to target institutions for maintenance and dissolution.

Political scientists often link “features such as the rule of law and the freedoms of speech, assembly, religion, and the press” with democracy, making the phrase liberal democracy all but redundant.<sup>xlvii</sup> In this study, the attitudes towards these other elements are not significantly linked to attitudes towards democracy ( $p > 0.10$ ). The sole exception is a very weak link with attitudes towards security threats ( $r = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). The lack of correlation suggests that there is not one single liberal democracy dimension of support. Profiles of commitments can more accurately represent citizens’ values in such cases.

To identify these profiles, Ward’s Hierarchical Cluster Analysis is used. This technique considers the individuals’ responses to each element to form a multidimensional institutional support space and divides the respondents into clusters that maximize the between group difference while minimizing the within-group differences. It provides “agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis with squared Euclidean distance as the similarity measure and Ward’s algorithm. Ward’s method calculates the sum of squared distances from each respondent to the mean of all variables and then minimizes the sum of squares of any two hypothetical clusters that can be formed at each clustering step.”<sup>xlviii</sup>

This technique has been used in examinations of democratic commitment in Egypt, Mexico, and Latin America. Schedler and Sarsfield conducted two studies on support for democracies and liberal values in Mexico. In both cohorts, citizens avow support for democracy while also endorsing restrictions on liberal values, such as women’s rights and free speech.<sup>xlix</sup>

Carlin and Singer evaluate clusters of democratic attitudes in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> They demonstrate that a minority of AmericasBarometer respondents endorse all the elements of polyarchy; approximately five-sixths are ambivalent or opposed to an institutional aspect of democracy, such as inclusive participation or stopping the president from suspending the Congress. Carlin, focusing on Chilean data from the AmericasBarometer, considers expressed democratic support, support for civil liberties, and intrinsic/instrumental democratic support.<sup>li</sup> He finds several clusters that incorporate democrats, including illiberal democrats, and autocrats. Ridge examines clusters of liberal and democratic attitudes in Egypt.<sup>lii</sup> Liberals and democrats are majorities in the Egypt sample, and liberal democrats' make-up a large minority, but there is also a liberal non-democrat cluster. In total, these studies have identified pockets of “democrats with adjectives” in multiple domains – not all democrats are liberal and not all liberals are democrats. This survey data can be used to examine those propensities in Tunisia.

[Figure 1]

The average silhouette width method was used to determine the optimal number of clusters. Three were identified, as seen in the cluster dendrogram of the hierarchical groupings (Figure 1). The cluster analysis results are shown in Table 2. Each cell in Table 2 shows the mean response value and the standard deviation for that feature in that cluster.

[Table 2]

For the analysis, opposition to that institution was coded -1. Individuals who said they were unsure about a value or could not answer for or against it were coded 0. Support was coded 1. Thus, higher cluster mean values indicate that the cluster is favourably disposed to that element, whereas lower values indicate greater opposition within the cluster toward that institution. Following Schedler and Sarsfield, for interpretability, averages at or below -0.50 are

identified as illiberal.<sup>liii</sup> Averages at or above 0.50 are identified as liberal. Averages between - 0.50 and 0.50 are identified as ambivalent on that value. Superscripts indicate whether the cluster means are significantly different; in many cases the ratings means are similar across the three clusters.

The overall sample can be described as Social-Liberal Ambivalent. This nomenclature reflects what was just described: strong support is expressed for many of these institutions and values, but a few were only weakly endorsed. Democracy itself was endorsed by a bare majority, so the aggregate is ambivalent on that point. Rather than being “democrats with adjectives,” they are liberal institutionalists with diverging views of democracy.

Consider the three clusters. The largest cluster, featuring nearly half of the respondents (48%), are Social-Liberal Democrats. Crucially, this cluster is pro-electoral democracy – 87% of them state that choosing the government by election is best. Only 1.3% are not democrats. They also endorse a wide range of pro-democratic institutions, such as the rule of law and the freedoms of assembly and protest. They favour allowing women and religious minorities to participate in Tunisian politics and a redistributive economic agenda. They are tepid, however, with respect to tolerating others’ political opinions and to constraining government responses to security threats. This group embodies the assumed linkage between support for liberal institutions and support for democracy.

Social-Liberal Democrats are not a majority by themselves. Furthermore, despite being largely democrats, this group is not necessarily composed of budding political evangelists. On one hand, the young woman who was so enthusiastic to be asked her political opinions is in this cluster. On the other hand, a 25-34-year-old man in this cluster wrote that he does not care about politics. These respondents favour democracy and hold liberal values. That is not inexorable



proof that they would turn out to constrain a leader who threatens democracy, particularly if the other institutions they support are protected.

The second cluster is the smallest. These individuals can be termed the Restrictive Ambivalents. While they endorse the rule of law and generous economic policies, they are ambivalent about civil liberties, like political participation and freedom of association. Furthermore, they take an illiberal stance with respect to political tolerance; they oppose allowing people to share publicly views they dislike. This may contribute to their reservations with respect to the right to protest. The moniker ambivalent reflects the varied views on democracy in the cluster. Unlike the other two, which hew substantially to one side of the issue, this cluster is more split. While 59.7% are democrats, 14.5% are non-democrats. A quarter say that for them it does not matter. There is thus little reason to suspect this population would constrain a president who sacrifices democracy to improve the economy or weed out corruption.

The final cluster, which is the second largest (39.6%), is particularly relevant. This group are Social-Liberal Non-democrats. In this group, 84.8% indicate that an unelected government is preferable to an elected one, and 12.3% report that choosing the government by election or not does not matter for them. Despite this opposition (or indifference) to electoral democracy, this group endorses the other elements in the same pattern as the Social-Liberal Democrats. In fact, they endorse them at the same rate in almost every case. The exception is lower tolerance of the expression for contrary viewpoints. Thus, despite supporting these liberal institutions, the citizens do not endorse the core feature of democracy, electing the government. Liberalism and democracy are functionally decoupled here.

In terms of securing electoral democracy, it is not normatively or practically trivial for 39.6% of Tunisians to be *Social-Liberal Non-democrats* – to reject democratic institutions. It is

far from surprising that the woman who expounded on the legitimacy and necessity of President Saied's actions is part of this cluster. There is no reason to think this population would revolt from a president constraining democracy in the service of the favoured institutions and policies, such as the rule of law and economic redistribution. Objections may arise if the other opportunities for political participation are constrained, such as the right to protest or freely associate. Free elections themselves, though, are not the crux for the group.

[Table 3]

Multinomial regression analysis can link respondent characteristics to these cluster profiles. For analysis, the reference cluster is Social-Liberal Democrats, meaning that the coefficients show the change in the likelihood of being part of that cluster, as opposed to being a Social-Liberal Democrat, based on having that characteristic. In this case, demographics do little to predict the cluster in which each respondent is situated.

Only sex and religion are significant. Women are more likely than men to be Social-Liberal Non-democrats. This is consistent with previous research on the Arab world, Africa, and Latin America, which has reported that women are less likely to support democracy than men are.<sup>liv</sup> Women may fear that an elections-based system of government would lead to losing their rights. This would be consistent with research on women's political preferences in Muslim-majority countries, which has found that Arab Muslim women are less interested in democracy because they fear that it would empower Islamists who would install gender-based restrictions.<sup>lv</sup> Their objection would not be to elections *per se* but to the threat that elections may pose to liberal institutions they value. This would also be consistent with the fact that there are more men than women in the Ambivalent cluster.

A parallel argument could be made about religious minorities. Compared to Muslim Tunisians, Christian respondents were less likely to be Restrictive Ambivalents as opposed to Social-Liberal Democrats and more likely to be Social-Liberal Non-Democrats than Social-Liberal Democrats compared to Muslims. However, almost all Tunisians are Muslims; there are very few minorities in the sample. Thus, these results must be considered with caution; that both Christians in the sample were non-democrats and the one Jewish respondent was a democrat could be coincidental. Follow-up research that can engage more directly with the religious minorities should unpack this perspective.

Economic conditions are strongly regarded as having turned Tunisians against their democracy and made them more supportive of Saïed's reforms.<sup>lvi</sup> For instance, Former-President Marzouki attributes the country's anti-democratic turn partially to the regime's failure to deliver socioeconomic gains for the public at large.<sup>lvii</sup> Although economic policy preferences may drive attitudes' towards Saïed's actions, income is not a significant predictor of citizens' profiles, nor are age, tertiary education, or residing in the capital. Each ideological cluster includes demographically-similar groups.

## **Conclusions**

This study uses the self-coup in Tunisia to demonstrate that would-be authoritarians can act strategically during democratic regressions to avoid popular reprisals. It examined public opinion data taken in Tunisia after the self-coup to show the constellation of values within which strategic reforms could be enacted while minimizing the likelihood of mass public opposition. Saïed's actions seem well-calculated to slip into this space.

Tunisian surveys evince widespread interest in a redistributive economic agenda and enforcing equality before the law. At the same time, corruption, the rule of law, and the economy

are sore points for Tunisians. Programs to aggressively address these domains could enjoy popular support, even be seen as vital for the state. Saïed’s choice to revoke legislators’ immunity could be framed as servicing this problem and fulfilling the public will as long as it is not used solely against one group or party. The weak public opposition to an aggressive state response to security threats, espoused here and in the Afrobarometer, implies a population that would tolerate aggressive state actions that (appear to) serve the public interest. They explicitly would brook human rights abuses. The extension from security threat is difficult to gauge; lack of access to food may trigger a similar willingness to sacrifice individual rights. Some of Saïed’s decisions (i.e, changing the prime minister and revoking parliamentary immunity) may pale in comparison. Follow-up studies should examine the levels of threat necessary to induce this acceptance of government action.

Support for civil liberties, such as women’s political participation and the freedom to join together and to agitate for social change, is also evident. An agenda that seemed to threaten these opportunities for participation and expression of public will might draw greater popular admonition. Amna Guellali, Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, said, “Tunisians have learned during the 10 years of the democratic process how to fight for their rights, and I think even though there are no counter powers right now, and the fact that there are no checks and balances like the Constitutional Court, civil society is quite strong in defending the rights and freedoms and—maybe it's wishful thinking—but I do hope that it's going to set some boundaries on the concentration of powers that can be risky for democracy.”<sup>lviii</sup> Retaining the right for public opposition may forestall actual public opposition.

Democracy itself does not appear to be a tripwire for public outcry. In this survey, only half the respondents reported that choosing the government by election is always best; more than

a third avowed that unelected governments are superior in some cases. If democracy is a tool for attaining results, rather than an end in itself, other tools can be considered when the circumstances call for it. Another study found that a large majority were willing to sacrifice *dimuqratiyya* to fight corruption and serve the people.<sup>lix</sup> Although ignoring or rescheduling elections may draw the most international attention, it may not trigger the most domestic condemnation.

Thus, Saïed may have found a safe haven in his office-aggrandizing reforms. Tackling corruption and economic challenges would secure some public backing. The rule of law and generous economic policies are more popular than electoral democracy itself. Currently poor economic conditions have battered his popularity.<sup>lx</sup> As long as Saïed signals allegiance to the appropriate liberal institutions – such as by appointing the first woman prime minister – he may sufficiently skirt public backlash against his actions. One of the survey respondents, a 35–44-year-old woman in the Social-Liberal Non-Democrat cluster, wrote, “The state is the singular masterpiece for human rights and guaranteeing stability but without distinguishing between the man of religion and the man of the peoples, just as a kind of balance must be created between the rich and the poor.” Saïed may be pulling off this balancing act. Attacks on the judiciary or protestors, though, could betray insufficient loyalty to other, valued institutions. That could turn the public tide. Follow through on the other parameters would be more determinative of his success, then, than whether or not it seems “democratic.”

Whether these actions in fact pose a long-term threat to democracy is hard to foretell. Saïed is currently promising a constitutional referendum and elections. Welzel argues that citizens who support institutions like the rule of law and gender equality will inevitably become dissatisfied with a non-democratic regime and push for democratic (re-)institutionalization.<sup>lxi</sup>

Other scholars are sceptical that the attitudes towards these institutions have any causal connection with democratization.<sup>lxii</sup> At the same time, liberal non-democracies are at habitual risk of sliding into illiberal authoritarianism.<sup>lxiii</sup> Tunisia's condition and Saïed's position are necessarily in a fundamentally tenuous situation. Careful attention must be paid, then, to further efforts by the current regime to slip away from democracy or to use the guise of liberal policy to cover over anti-democratic action.

The same is true for other would-be authoritarians who seek to follow his example. Their reforms would have to be tailored to their polities. Strategic reversions would lay the foundations for concentrated authority. Only pervasive and demonstrable public commitment to these institutions would proof them against such subtle autocratization.

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Table 1: Democratic Values Survey Questions and Preferences

Variable	Question	Yes/ Dem.	Unsure	No/ Non-Dem.	Prefer Not to Answer
Democracy	Which of the following statements do you agree with: Choosing the government by election is always best, Sometimes an unelected government is best, For someone like me it does not really matter	50.6%	13.5%	35.9%	--
Women	Should women participate in politics?*	84.5%	5.6%	7.0%	2.8%
Minority	Should religious minorities (i.e., Christians) participate in politics?*	60.6%	15.3%	13.9%	10.2%
Opinion	Would you support someone's going on television to promote a position with which you disagree?*	40.2%	21.1%	33.3%	5.4%
Clergy	If a clergyman breaks the law, should he be given a lighter sentence because he is a clergyman?***	6.4%	3.0%	89.2%	1.4%
Police	If a police officer breaks the law, should he be punished the same that a civilian would be?*	87.3%	4.0%	7.0%	1.6%
Redistribute	Should the government redistribute resources to provide the poor with food and housing?*	90.4%	5.2%	3.0%	1.4%
Income Gap	Should the government try to limit the income gap between the rich and the poor?*	79.1%	9.0%	8.6%	3.2%
Associate	Should the government intervene in decisions concerning one's desire to associate with other persons?***	6.4%	13.1%	78.3%	2.2%
Protest	Should residents be allowed to protest peacefully to bring about social change?*	82.7%	10.6%	5.0%	1.6%
Threat	Should the government be free to deal with suspected threats in any way necessary to secure public safety and security, even if it means violating human rights?***	34.9%	23.9%	38.0%	3.2%

\*Yes is Liberal \*\*No is Liberal

Table 2: Mean Values Per Cluster

Group	Women	Minority	Opinion	Clergy	Police	Redist- tribution	Income Gap	Associa- tion	Protest	Threats	Democrat
Social- Liberal Democrats	0.874 <sup>c</sup> (0.40)	0.640 <sup>c</sup> (0.59)	0.251 (0.83)	0.816 <sup>bc</sup> (0.53)	0.828 <sup>bc</sup> (0.52)	0.887 <sup>c</sup> (0.37)	0.686 <sup>bc</sup> (0.64)	0.724 <sup>c</sup> (0.57)	0.895 <sup>c</sup> (0.36)	0.050 <sup>c</sup> (0.88)	0.858 (0.38)
Restrictive Ambivalents	0.016 (0.90)	-0.387 (0.71)	-0.629 (0.58)	0.839 <sup>ac</sup> (0.45)	0.742 <sup>ac</sup> (0.57)	0.613 (0.71)	0.677 <sup>ac</sup> (0.59)	0.452 (0.69)	0.226 (0.78)	0.371 (0.73)	0.452 (0.74)
Social- Liberal Non- Democrats	0.893 <sup>a</sup> (0.38)	0.528 <sup>a</sup> (0.70)	0.066 (0.85)	0.838 <sup>ab</sup> (0.54)	0.792 <sup>ab</sup> (0.57)	0.939 <sup>a</sup> (0.30)	0.736 <sup>ab</sup> (0.60)	0.797 <sup>a</sup> (0.51)	0.807 <sup>a</sup> (0.49)	-0.102 <sup>a</sup> (0.83)	-0.812 (0.47)
Full sample: Liberal Ambivalents	0.775 (0.56)	0.468 (0.73)	0.068 (0.86)	0.827 (0.52)	0.803 (0.55)	0.873 (0.41)	0.705 (0.62)	0.719 (0.58)	0.777 (0.52)	0.030 (0.85)	0.147 (0.92)

Group	Women	Minority	Opinion	Clergy	Police	Redist- tribution	Income Gap	Association	Protest	Threats	Democrat
Social- Liberal Democrats	Liberal	Liberal	Ambivalent	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Ambivalent	Liberal
Restrictive Ambivalent	Ambivalent	Ambivalent	Illiberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Ambivalent	Ambivalent	Ambivalent	Ambivalent
Social- Liberal Non- Democrats	Liberal	Liberal	Ambivalent	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Ambivalent	Illiberal
Full sample: Liberal Ambivalents	Liberal	Ambivalent	Ambivalent	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal	Ambivalent	Ambivalent

Note: Range of means for illiberal and non-democratic: (-1,-0.5)

Range of means for ambivalent: [-0.5,0.5]

Range of means for liberal and democratic: (0.5, 1)

a Not significantly different from Social-Liberal Democrats by Tukey's HSD test (p<0.1)

b Not significantly different from Restrictive Ambivalents by Tukey's HSD test (p<0.1)

c Not significantly different from Liberal Non-Democrats by Tukey's HSD test (p<0.1)

Table 3: Multinomial Regression Models

	<i>Dependent variable: Cluster</i>	
	Restrictive (1)	Ambivalent Social-Liberal Non-Democrat (2)
Religion: Christianity	-2.321** (0.000)	16.561** (0.00000)
Religion: Other	1.201 (1.680)	-12.130** (0.00001)
Religion: None - not religious	0.683 (0.863)	0.330 (0.680)
Male	0.313 (0.338)	-0.474* (0.223)
25-34	0.148 (0.509)	0.067 (0.349)
35-44	-0.305 (0.549)	0.208 (0.361)
45+	0.032 (0.511)	0.603 (0.347)
Income: 266-532	0.583 (0.471)	-0.182 (0.284)
Income: 533-1064	0.246 (0.507)	-0.566 (0.311)
Income: 1065-2665	-0.266 (0.684)	-0.270 (0.378)
Income: 2666+	0.185 (0.775)	-0.384 (0.506)
Income: Prefer not to say/ Don't know	0.509 (0.660)	-0.103 (0.404)
Employed	0.114 (0.361)	0.172 (0.235)
College Education	0.656 (0.441)	0.250 (0.265)
Reside in Capital (Tunis)	0.067 (0.341)	-0.275 (0.232)
Constant	-2.488** (0.645)	-0.216 (0.387)
N	498	498
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,000.368	1,000.368

Note: Reference Cluster – Social Liberal Democrat

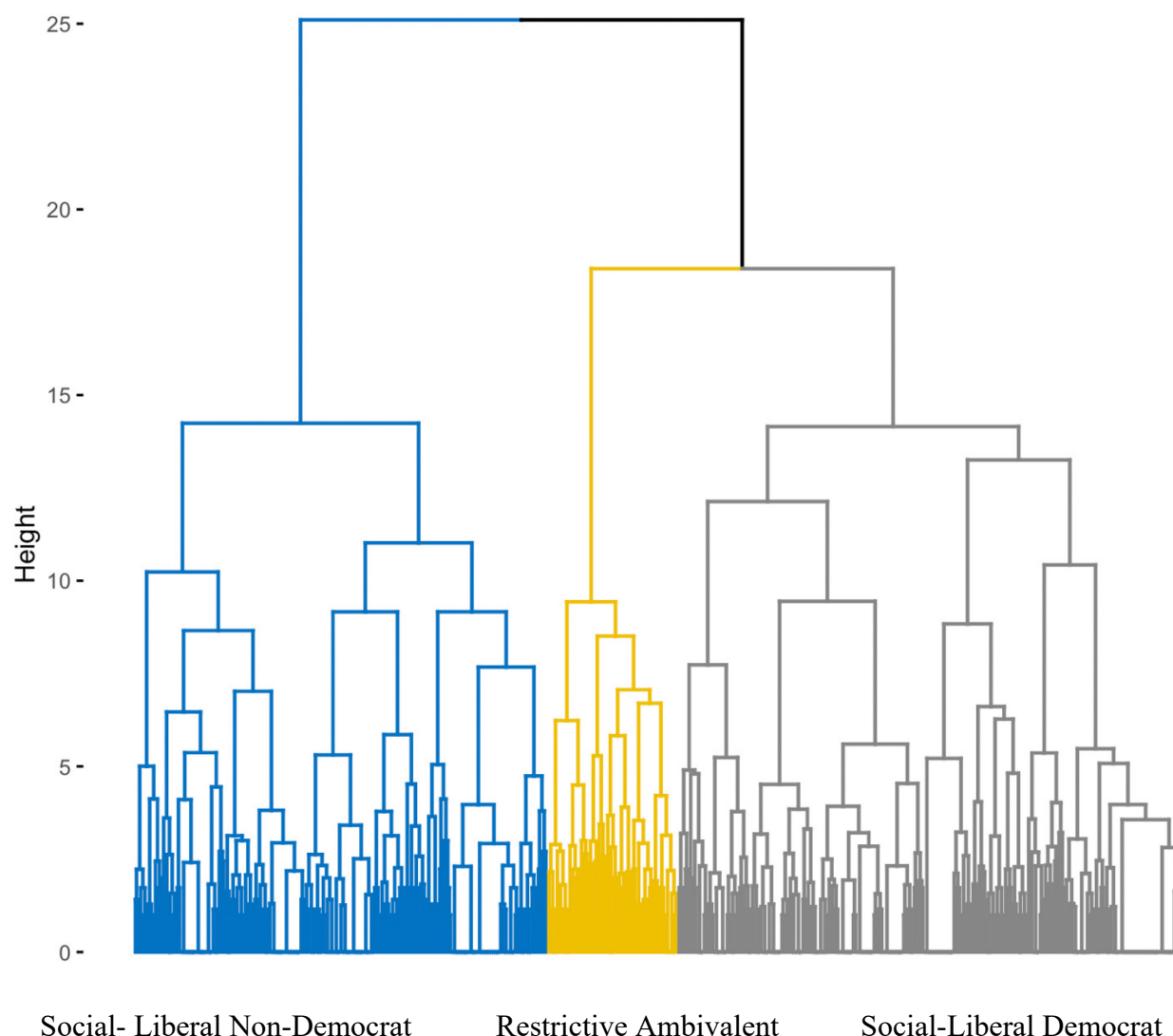
\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01

Reference Religion: Islam

Reference Age: 18-2

Reference Income: Less than \$266

Figure 1: Cluster Dendrogram



<sup>i</sup> I thank Ryan Carlin and Matthew Singer and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on prior versions of this manuscript.

<sup>ii</sup> Ellali and O’Grady, “Tunisia’s fledgling democracy”

<sup>iii</sup> POMED. “Examining Tunisia’s Political Crisis.”

<sup>iv</sup> Ridge, Hannah. “(Il)liberal Democrats in Egypt.”

<sup>v</sup> Schedler and Sarsfield. “Democrats with adjectives” and Schedler and Sarsfield. “Demócratas iliberales”

<sup>vi</sup> Liberalism and democracy are necessarily distinguished. Democracy means the people rule directly or “must at least be able to choose their representatives in free and fair elections.” Liberalism sets “what the limits to [leaders’] power are once they are in office. These limits, which are ultimately designed to protect the rights of the individual [and] demand the rule of law” (Plattner 2019, 7). To avoid confusion from evolving interpretations of “liberal” economic policy, the word *social* is used for redistributive economic policies.

<sup>vii</sup> Hammami, “Past as Prologue”

<sup>viii</sup> Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2022*.

<sup>ix</sup> Brown, “Tunisia’s Saied appoints Najla Bouden Romdhane”

<sup>x</sup> “Tunisian President to change voting”

<sup>xi</sup> Amara, “Tunisians union calls national strike”

<sup>xii</sup> “Tunisia judges strike”

<sup>xiii</sup> “Tunisia: Protest marks new coalition”

<sup>xiv</sup> Marzouki, “Coup in Tunisia”

<sup>xv</sup> Marzouki, “Coup in Tunisia”

<sup>xvi</sup> Blackman and Nugent, Tunisia’s president threatened”

<sup>xvii</sup> Note: The word used in the Arab Barometer and Blackman and Nugent questions is *dimuqratiyya*.

Approximately half of MENA citizens construe *dimuqratiyya* as a set of socio-economic outcomes, rather than a description of political processes (Tessler, Jamal, and Robbins 2012). This makes the term a poor translation from an analytical perspective. Questions using *dimuqratiyya* functionally overestimate democratic commitment (Ridge 2019). The word was avoided in this survey for that reason.

<sup>xviii</sup> Grubman and Şaşmaz. “The Collapse of Tunisia’s Party System”

<sup>xix</sup> Grubman and Şaşmaz. “The Collapse of Tunisia’s Party System”

<sup>xx</sup> YouGov MENA uses “search engine optimization (SEO), affiliate networks, niche websites, and growth hacking techniques such as panelist refer-a-friend campaigns and social networks” to ensure hard-to-reach populations like young people and ethnic minorities are included in the panel. Panelist demographics are measured every 3-6 months to keep age, income, education, employment, and location information current. YouGov MENA monitors the omnibus for speeders and straightliners; recurrently-flagged respondents are removed from the panel (YouGov 2017). Online surveys require access to the internet or mobile phones. According to the International Telecommunication Union, internet penetration in Tunisia is 66.7%; per the Instance Nationale des Télécommunication, 98.9% of the population is covered by 2G, 3G, or 4G, with 4G covering 91.3% of the population (Freedom House 2021a). It is thus possible for internet-based surveys to reach most Tunisians. The surveys are answerable in desktop, tablet, and mobile formats.

<sup>xxi</sup> Nyhan and Zeitzoff, “Conspiracy and misperception”; Isani and Schlipphak, “The role of societal cues”; Ridge “(I)liberal democrats in Egypt”; and Blackman and Jackson, “Gender Stereotypes”

<sup>xxii</sup> Nine foreigners took the survey, but they are excluded from the analysis. Eighteen individuals opened the omnibus link but did not fill it out for unknown reasons. YouGov reported a completion rate of 98.48%. 1.52% either started but did not submit the survey for unknown reasons or failed YouGov’s quality check (correctly identifying a picture of an electronic device or animal).

<sup>xxiii</sup> MENA survey-takers may be more likely to answer surveys are sponsored by universities than by governments, though the results are mixed on that front (Corstange 2014; Gengler et al 2019). The survey and consent procedure were approved by the university IRB.

<sup>xxiv</sup> An internet panel increases anonymity, which improves honesty while reducing skipping and bias (Lupu and Michelitch 2018). Research on the influence of Covid-19 on surveys suggests it is not biasing response patterns (Peyton, Huber, and Coppock 2020).

<sup>xxv</sup> These summary statistics do not include the demographic weights YouGov provides for age and gender representativeness.

<sup>xxvi</sup> This is higher than the 21.6% measured in the Arab Barometer, but that survey also showed that 49.1% of Tunisians had completed secondary education. The country is generally well-educated. To the extent that education is associated with support for democracy, this could lead to a slight overestimation of democratic commitment. Other MENA studies have not substantiated that relationship, however (Jamal 2006; Ridge 2019). Thus, although the moderate support here for democracy could represent the best-case scenario for measuring democratic commitment, it is not evident that it is an overestimation.

<sup>xxvii</sup> UNESCO. “Education and Literacy.”

<sup>xxviii</sup> Non-response to income is expected; 8.4% declined to name their income. In 2018, the Arab Barometer treated 450 dinar as the median monthly income, so these figures are in line with the national statistics.

<sup>xxix</sup> The reference to America likely reflects the fact that respondents were told an American researcher originated the survey so that they knew it was not the Tunisian government.

<sup>xxx</sup> Schmitter and Karl, “What democracy is,” 76

<sup>xxxi</sup> Plattner, “Illiberal Democracy”

<sup>xxxii</sup> Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*

<sup>xxxiii</sup> This is a standard democratic support question; it is used in surveys like the Afrobarometer. It is useful to distinguish individuals who will support and protect a democratic regime from those who would be merely tolerant of one. Those who view democracy as one acceptable choice among many would be less likely to constrain a would-be autocrat, who could claim exceptional circumstance or propose one of their accepted alternatives.



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- xxxiv Arab Barometer II
- xxxv Arab Barometer VI
- xxxvi Ridge “(Il)liberal democrats in Egypt”
- xxxvii Schedler and Sarsfield (2007;2009), who conducted a similar study in Mexico, addressed indigenous populations and homosexuals. While four-fifths endorsed participation by indigenous citizens, only about half endorsed homosexuals’ participation.
- xxxviii Ridge “(Il)liberal democrats in Egypt”
- xxxix Schedler and Sarsfield. "Democrats with adjectives" and Schedler and Sarsfield. " Demócratas iliberales"
- xl Arab Barometer V
- xli Arab Barometer VI
- xlii Ridge “(Il)liberal democrats in Egypt”; Schedler and Sarsfield. "Democrats with adjectives" and Schedler and Sarsfield. " Demócratas iliberales"
- xliiii Rollinde and Le Saout, *Émeutes et mouvements sociaux* ; Thyen and Karadag, "Between affordable welfare"
- xliv Bishara, "Precarious collective action"; Hong, "Demographic Pressure"
- xlv Arab Barometer V
- lxvi Schedler and Sarsfield “Democrats with adjectives,” 639
- lxvii Plattner “Illiberal Democracy,” 6-7
- lxviii Carlin and Singer “Support for Polyarchy,” 1058
- lxix Schedler and Sarsfield. "Democrats with adjectives" and Schedler and Sarsfield. " Demócratas iliberales"
- <sup>1</sup> Carlin and Singer (2011)
- li Carlin, "Distrusting democrats"
- lii Ridge “(Il)liberal democrats in Egypt”
- liiii Schedler and Sarsfield. "Democrats with adjectives" and Schedler and Sarsfield. " Demócratas iliberales"
- liv Carrión, "Illiberal democracy"; Ciftci, "Secular-Islamist cleavage"; García-Peñalosa and Konte, "Why are women"
- lv Rizzo, Abdel-Latif, and Meyer, "The relationship between"
- lvi Ellali and O’Grady, “Tunisia’s fledgling democracy”
- lvii Marzouki, “Coup in Tunisia”
- lviii POMED, “Examining Tunisia’s Political Crisis,” 10
- lix Blackman and Nugent, Tunisia’s president threatened”
- lx “Poll: Tunisia President Saied”
- lxi Welzel, "Democratic Horizons"
- lxii Foa, Mounk, and Klassen, "Why The Future"
- lxiii Mounk, *The people vs. democracy*