

TUNISIA POLITICAL UNREST

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN TUNISIA?

On 14 Jan 2022, thousands of protesters took to the streets, defying the ban on gatherings that had been imposed across Tunisia in view of the surging coronavirus cases. However, Ennahda and other political parties in the country have claimed that this ban was motivated to discourage citizens from voicing their concerns over the ongoing political crisis that threatens the democratic framework of the North African country.

The demonstrators were prevented from reaching Habib Bourguiba Avenue, the central thoroughfare of Tunis, in a violent Police intervention that witnessed the forces charging the protestors with batons, tear gas and water cannons. However, the date of the protest is significant in Tunisian political history because it marks the 12th anniversary of the fall of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's oppressive regime- whose resignation had paved the way for the democratic transition of the country.



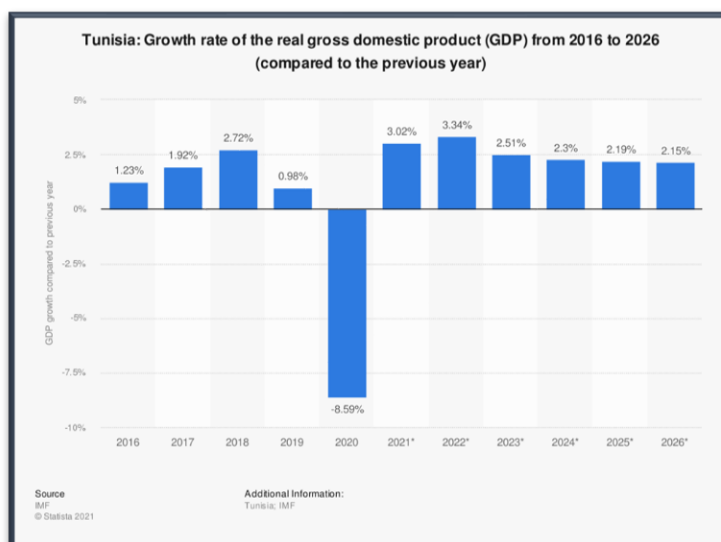
BACKGROUND

WHY ARE PEOPLE PROTESTING?

- On 25 Jul 2021, the President of Tunisia, Kais Saied, suspended the elected Parliament, sacked the then Prime Minister, Hichem Mechichi and seized executive authority in a move that he has claimed to be constitutional. President Saied has ruled by decree since.
- This measure came after protests were witnessed in the streets of Tunisia, including in the capital Tunis and the coastal city Sfax. The demonstrators, enraged over the dismal state of affairs in the country, torched the offices of Ennahda in Siliana. In Mar 2021, Tunisia's unemployment rate was as high as 17.8%, with about 600000 Tunisians falling below the poverty line and by Jul 2021, Covid-19 cases and Covid-19 related deaths had reached a record high. There was a general discontent for Hichem Mechichi's government that had failed to adequately address corruption, economic and healthcare woes faced by the people.



The population of Tunisia has been divided in their reception of the Jul 2021 power grab by their President- a move which the leaders of the opposition have denounced as a coup. Yet, President Saied has remained popular among a population that is increasingly losing its patience over the failure of this move to bring about the reforms that were to address the socio-economic conditions of the country. Instead, with the pandemic looming large, the Tunisian economy has witnessed no signs of a robust economic recovery.



On 13 Dec, President Saied announced a series of measures that are expected to alleviate some of the political uncertainty that the country finds itself in the midst of. In his address to the nation, President Saied stated that a constitutional referendum will be organised in Jul 2022 and that parliamentary elections will take place in Dec 2022. While the extent to which Tunisia's constitution will be amended remains unclear, President Saied undoubtedly leans towards a strong presidency which suggests that the measures he will adopt will be motivated by his desire to strengthen executive power.

ASSESSMENT

The Tunisian population is likely to continue to show its discontent with the President and his failure to alleviate the socio-economic conditions through protests and demonstrations. However, mounting political instability and threat to security in the country could be detrimental to Tunisia's Foreign Direct Investment that had increased by 194.4 million USD in Jun 2021. Furthermore, Tunisia has inherited its economic woes from the Arab Spring that saw generous international support in the form of loans and grants to assist the country with its democratic transition. In 2020, the external debt of Tunisia amounted to 34.32 billion USD. In Jun 2021, its current account recorded a deficit of 823.7 million USD. In order to stimulate the country's battered economy, the Tunisian government has revealed its plans to borrow an additional 7 billion USD from foreign lenders and domestic sources, which will bring the debt to GDP of the country to 82.6% as opposed to 100% in 2021. While the country is hoping to reach a bailout deal with the IMF in 2022, structural reforms to address the economic stagnation in the country continues to be neglected.





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