

# How much popular support does Tunisia's president really have?

Surveys suggest Tunisians approved of Kais Saied's power grab. But they're not actually answering his calls to action.

By Mohamed Dhia Hammami and Sharan Grewal

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Tunisian President Kais Saied last week seized control of the country's independent electoral commission, the latest democratic safeguard to fall since his power grab last July. Vowing to clean up corruption, Saied over the past year has systematically dismantled the most important institutions created through Tunisia's Arab Spring transition — including the constitution, the parliament, the high judicial council and even the anti-corruption commission. Instead, Saied has relied on the police and military courts to harass, detain and prosecute his political opponents.

Public opinion polls since the power grab suggest that these moves might be resonating with a population frustrated with a sluggish economy and perceptions of corruption. Although the economy has worsened under Saied's rule, polls continue to report majority approval for Saied and his actions.

This perception that the power grab is popular has been crucial to its success. According to interviews we've conducted over the past year, this perception of public support deterred Tunisia's political parties and its powerful labor union, as well as U.S. policymakers, from coming out more strongly against the July coup. Such public support will also prove essential to pass Saied's new constitution through a referendum in July, during which he is likely to pursue his vision of empowering the presidency and sidelining political parties.

Our research, however, suggests that these indications of support may be less than they appear. Since December, Saied has been able to persuade only a small minority of his supporters to take action on his behalf, whether to take to the streets in pro-government protest, to participate in online consultations about the new constitution, or to vote in local elections. This suggests that Saied’s supporters might be better termed a “silent majority,” unwilling to take action beyond passive support.

## Attitudes don’t always add up to action

The gap between survey attitudes and actual behaviors is a long-standing and well-established finding in survey research. Recent research by Eva-Maria Trüding and André Bächtiger, for instance, suggests this gap is especially relevant for populists, whose supporters are particularly susceptible to expressing rhetorical support for direct democracy mechanisms such as referendums — but then don’t actually participate in the process.

Does Tunisia have a similar attitude gap? Despite the supposed support for Saied, according to surveys, he has struggled to mobilize these supporters online and offline. Moreover, our interviews this spring with Tunisian politicians supportive of the coup suggest that Saied is both aware of and increasingly concerned about his inability to mobilize wider public support.

Saied’s worries began last year, on the 11th anniversary of Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation, the event that sparked Tunisia’s 2010-2011 revolution — and the broader Arab Spring. Saied had shifted the official commemoration day to Dec. 17, rather than Jan. 14 (the day Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was toppled), to reflect his view that the revolution that day had been hijacked by political parties. But few people showed up to celebrate his new Revolution Day, in stark contrast to the thousands who turned out each year on Jan. 14. Similarly, when Saied called on his supporters to protest the Supreme Judicial Council on Feb. 6, fewer than 400 people showed up.

A second red flag was the online consultation Saied held in the first three months of this year, which was designed to gather public opinion over a new constitution. Despite using government resources to encourage participation — even offering free Internet through 250 “youth houses” — only about 535,000 people out of a population of 11.8 million participated.

That’s about 6 percent of the citizens 16 and older who were eligible to participate. And that’s a far cry from the 3.5 million Saied initially expected to participate in the consultation, or even the 2.8 million votes he received in the second round of the 2019 presidential elections.

A final indicator that Saied’s support levels might be an illusion was the low turnout in the municipal by-elections on March 26 and 27. Municipal elections have never engendered high turnout, but the paltry numbers were far below 2018 levels, despite higher voter registration. Although Saied did not encourage his supporters to vote in these elections, the low turnout bodes ill for his vision of a direct democracy with municipal elections at their core.

## Why this matters

These signs suggest that Saied may be unable to cajole large numbers of Tunisians — even those who say they support him — to actually vote, attend a pro-government rally or even fill out an online questionnaire on his behalf. These signs thus raise questions about whether Saied can actually mobilize sufficient votes to pass his new constitution in July, and even to win reelection.

The supporters he can rely on to mobilize into the streets or into the polls might today be closer to the numbers who supported him in the first round of the 2019 presidential election (18 percent) rather than the final runoff (73 percent), when he gained the support of the major political parties — each of which now opposes him.

Saied's plan calls for the creation of a new political system, and that requires passing a constitutional referendum this summer. He may still succeed in doing so, through a combination of mobilizing his base, co-opting some opposition parties and repressing the others. But if he cannot and all parties find common ground in opposing the new constitutional experiment, Saied may face stiff head winds in July's referendum — and in the parliamentary elections scheduled for December.

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