

118TH CONGRESS  
1ST SESSION

# H. RES. 613

Recognizing Tunisia's leadership in the Arab Spring and expressing support for upholding its democratic principles and norms.

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## IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JULY 25, 2023

Mr. PHILLIPS (for himself and Mr. WILSON of South Carolina) submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs

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## RESOLUTION

Recognizing Tunisia's leadership in the Arab Spring and expressing support for upholding its democratic principles and norms.

Whereas, on December 17, 2010, 26-year-old fruit and vegetable street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi lit himself on fire in desperate protest in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, an act that was largely seen as the beginning of the Arab Spring movement that spread throughout the region;

Whereas ensuing popular protests in Tunisia in response to the Ben Ali regime's de facto one-party rule, corruption, repression of civil liberties, and economic nepotism—

(1) forced the resignation of President Ben Ali from the office of president;

(2) ended his 23-year rule; and

(3) further galvanized similar pent-up democratic demands throughout the Arab world;

Whereas Tunisia emerged from the Arab Spring as one of the most hopeful and promising nascent democracies in the region, including with an interim government and an elected Constituent Assembly responsible for drafting a new constitution and fostering other political reforms;

Whereas, in February 2011, Senator John McCain urged United States support for Tunisia’s democratic transition, noting “The revolution in Tunisia has been very successful and it has become a model for the region.”;

Whereas, in March 2011, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon pledged full support for Tunisia’s transition to democracy, hailing the country’s revolution as the spark that lit “the profound and dramatic changes” sweeping the Arab world;

Whereas, on January 26, 2014, the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia adopted a new constitution demonstrating consensus for building a democracy founded on freedom and equality;

Whereas this new Constitution of Tunisia included Articles that—

- (1) gave equal rights to men and women;
- (2) protected freedoms of assembly, conscience, peaceful demonstration, expression, and publication; and
- (3) outlined an electoral system and representation for the Tunisian people with checks and balances;

Whereas, in November 2014, Tunisia held its first free and fair presidential election since its independence in 1956, with 27 candidates openly competing for the office of president;

Whereas longtime politician Beji Caid Essebsi won the election in a runoff with 55 percent of the vote, becoming Tunisia's first president to be legitimately elected based on universal suffrage since independence;

Whereas President Essebsi and the elected parliament faced many difficult challenges, including economic turmoil, terrorist attacks, and public expectations for change;

Whereas public disillusionment with the country's political elites increased amid continued corruption, worsening economic conditions, and devastating acts of terrorism that severely hurt the tourism industry and larger economy;

Whereas political outsider and constitutional law professor Kais Saied won the presidential run-off election held on October 13, 2019, and was sworn into office 10 days later in a peaceful transfer of power;

Whereas, by 2021, protests in response to police brutality and worsening economic conditions, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, occurred across cities in Tunisia, to which the police responded violently;

Whereas, in July 2021, President Saied capitalized on unrest to seize power by unilaterally—

(1) dismissing Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and his cabinet;

(2) suspending Parliament for 30 days; and

(3) asserting sweeping executive authority over policymaking and the judiciary without first consulting the government;

Whereas, on July 26, 2021, Tunisian security agents entered the headquarters in Tunis of the independent news orga-

nization al-Jazeera, and ordered staff to vacate the premises;

Whereas, as of November 2022, al-Jazeera’s offices remained closed and its journalism licenses have not been renewed;

Whereas, on September 22, 2021, President Saied suspended most provisions of the 2014 Constitution and asserted the right to rule by decree, without judicial review or other checks and balances;

Whereas, on March 30, 2022, President Saied dissolved Parliament;

Whereas, by early 2022, President Saied continued to undermine Tunisia’s democratic institutions, including by shutting the National Anti-Corruption Authority, asserting control over membership of the Independent High Authority for Elections, and dissolving the Supreme Judicial Council;

Whereas, on February 24, 2022, President Saied announced he intended to issue a decree restricting civil society organizations including a prohibition on foreign funding, stating “nongovernmental organizations must be prevented from accessing external funds . . . and we will do that”;

Whereas, on March 20, 2022, President Saied issued Decree Law 14 criminalizing the deliberate spread of “false or incorrect news” that could cause economic harm for which conviction is punishable by a prison sentence of 10 years to life;

Whereas, on June 1, 2022, President Saied unilaterally dismissed 57 judges, including the former president of the Supreme Judicial Council;

Whereas, in July 2022, President Saied put to a referendum a new draft constitution, which—

- (1) consolidated executive power under the presidency;
- (2) limited parliamentary authority; and
- (3) diminished judicial independence;

Whereas the new draft constitution was approved despite historically low voter turnout and heavy domestic and international criticism surrounding the lack of genuine debate or input throughout the drafting process;

Whereas, on September 16, 2022, President Saied issued Decree Law 54 which criminalizes the use of information systems to publish or circulate false information that “infringes on the rights of others or jeopardizes public safety or national defense or spreads terror among the population”, or with the aim of “defaming others, tarnishing their reputations, or causing them financial and moral harm”;

Whereas, as of November 2022, the government had opened at least 5 criminal investigations under Decree Law 54 for conduct comprising the exercise of freedom of expression;

Whereas, on September 15, 2022, President Saied released a new election law that increases his control over the electoral process and weakens the role of political parties in Tunisia’s political system;

Whereas, on March 9, 2023, President Saied announced plans to dissolve municipal councils whose election in 2018 had symbolized a first step toward much-needed political decentralization;

Whereas, between 2021 to 2023, Tunisia experienced—

- (1) a dramatic drop in voter participation and public confidence in the political process; and

(2) an escalation in politically motivated arrests of political opponents, judges, lawyers, journalists, business leaders, and other critics; and

Whereas President Saied’s actions have dramatically undermined Tunisia’s nascent democracy, co-opted and weakened its democratic institutions, and have threatened to return the country to authoritarianism: Now, therefore, be it

1       *Resolved*, That the House of Representatives—

2               (1) recognizes Tunisia as the symbolic birth-  
3               place of the historic Arab Spring movement and the  
4               country’s notable democratic reforms that emerged  
5               during the Arab Spring period;

6               (2) commends the Tunisian people for their  
7               courage and democratic achievements made in the  
8               immediate years following the Arab Spring;

9               (3) condemns actions taken by President Saied  
10              to undermine these democratic achievements and ex-  
11              presses deep concern for the recent reversals of such  
12              democratic gains, including—

13                       (A) the erosion of judicial independence;

14                       (B) political repression and arrests; and

15                       (C) the undemocratic consolidation of  
16              power in the hands of the president;

17              (4) urges the Government of Tunisia—

18                       (A) to release all political prisoners;

1           (B) to respect the rights of the people to  
2           free exercise of peaceful assembly, expression,  
3           and the press and to hold accountable individ-  
4           uals responsible for political repression and  
5           other human rights abuses since July 25, 2021;  
6           and

7           (C) to protect the right of association and  
8           to ensure civil society is able to operate without  
9           government interference; and

10          (5) calls on the Government of Tunisia to sup-  
11          port transparent and open presidential, parliamen-  
12          tary, and municipal election processes, including  
13          with regard to the presidential election scheduled for  
14          2024.

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