

The Politics Classroom
Episode 2023.13: The Collapse of Tunisia's Democracy
Host: Professor Floros
In the Classroom: Prof. Sharan Grewal,
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[00:00:00] **Professor Floros:** Earlier this summer, the topic of Tunisia came up in my conversation with Semih Patan about current Turkish politics. And when I dug a little deeper into Tunisian current events, I was dismayed about what I learned. I traveled to Tunisia in 2017 and met with multiple political and civil society leaders who acknowledged that problems existed, but remained proud of being the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring.

Sadly, that is no longer the case. Two of those who I met there have been jailed under the new president, with only one so far released. I wanted to delve deeper into what has unfolded in Tunisia since my visit, and I'm going to share what I learned with you today. So, let's get started in the Politics Classroom, recorded on July 26, 2023.

Intro music: Three Goddesses by Third Age

You're listening to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Kate Floros, a Clinical Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois, Chicago. My guest in the classroom today is Professor Sharan Grewal. Professor Grewal received a bachelor's degree from the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, as well as a Certificate of Arab Studies. He received his master's and PhD in Politics from Princeton University. Since 2019, he has been an Assistant Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary and a Nonresident Fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at The Brookings Institution. Professor Grewal will spend the 2023-24 academic year as a Research Fellow at the Middle East Initiative at Harvard University.

He is the prolific author of numerous journal articles, and he has a new book hot off the press from Oxford University Press, titled *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring*. Professor Sharan Grewal, welcome to The Politics Classroom.

[00:02:52] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Thank you.

[00:02:53] **Professor Floros:** So, I want to just start with asking what led you to study Tunisia in the first place. It's a pretty small country with not a lot of regional or international presence. So, what led you to be interested in this, in this topic?

[00:03:10] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Yeah, you know, I started actually studying Egypt first, like most, uh, scholars who work on the Middle East. I had studied abroad in Egypt and it happened to be during the Arab Spring. It was Fall 2011, so it was exciting. People were protesting, people were gearing up for their first free elections, um, and at that point I fell in love with revolutions and transitions and the struggle to, to get to democracy. But fast forward two years, uh, and Egypt's transition falls to a military coup.

And at that point, it became very difficult to do research in Egypt, especially. And it also created this contrast about Egypt's transition failed, but there is this success story, Tunisia,

that somehow made it to democracy, had a successful revolution, kicked off the Arab Spring, and then survived those volatile transitional years.

Uh, and so it was at that point that I was curious to know, what was it about Tunisia that made it succeed? I didn't like the initial explanations about how, "Oh, they're a homogenous country, it's something cultural, that they're committed to democracy and to compromise, and that's why it succeeded." I felt that there was more to the story.

And so, I went to Tunisia for the first time, 2014, and I've been there every year since, uh, multiple trips. And I've really fallen in love with Tunisia beyond, you know, the, the success story and trying to figure out why it succeeded, but the, the energy that I saw, especially in those early years for trying to make democracy work, uh, the excitement, uh, among Tunisians.

It made me fall in love with the, with the story and to keep going back to try to trace out how the transition is evolving. And from that, from, I mean, a comparative politics standpoint, it also makes Tunisia quite interesting. It broke the mold, unlike anywhere else in the Middle East, made it to democracy, kept it for 10 years until most recently this collapse.

And so it makes it puzzling to see what is similar about Tunisia compared to other new democracies elsewhere in Latin America or Eastern Europe, but also what makes it different from Egypt or the rest of the Middle East. So, for me, that's what makes Tunisia so fascinating.

[00:05:25] **Professor Floros:** Okay, so as you mentioned, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia in December 2010, when protests erupted after a young street vendor set himself on fire after being harassed by police. Within a month, Tunisian dictator President Ben Ali fled the country and a transitional government took over. While Tunisia had been hailed as an Arab Spring success story, the path to and maybe from democracy has been rocky. The first democratic elections were held in October 2011 with Ennahda, an Islamist party, winning the most seats in parliament and forming a coalition government with two secular parties.

Meanwhile, a constitutional assembly was elected, but clashed on what the new constitution should look like. So, I have a couple of questions about this time period. What led to the struggle to create the new constitution?

[00:06:19] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** At its core, it was about identity. Everyone was united that "We don't want dictatorship. We were fed up with Ben Ali. We wanted something new," but what that something new was, was a source of division. You had some, uh, you might call them secularists or modernist, liberals who envisioned, uh, more of a secular democracy. But the largest party in the elections, Ennahda, envisioned more of a Muslim democracy, uh, not quite an Islamic state. As far as Islamists go, Ennahda has always been one of the most liberal and moderate among the Islamists, but their vision was a democracy that has more of an Islamic reference.

Uh, and so that was the, the key source of division. Part of it also was more a paranoia of what might happen, uh, more of what Ennahda might do than what they actually did in the constitution, but there were also real differences over the constitution in terms of, should there be a reference to Sharia or Islamic law? Should that be the basis of legislation like elsewhere in the Arab world, or should there be complete popular sovereignty over legislation, no religious source to it? Then, on specific issues about religious freedom: is atheism permitted,

freedom of conscience? On women's rights? There was a controversial clause that Ennahda had put in an earlier draft that women are complimentary to men as opposed to equal to men that provoked a big backlash.

And so, these sorts of identity culture war issues in essence, uh, were at the core of the divisions over the constitution. There were also some other political divisions. For instance, "do we want a presidential system, or do we want more of a parliamentary system?" There they found a compromise to create a semi-presidential system, something I'm sure we'll return to in the course of this conversation.

But at the core, the polarization was a, uh, ideological secular-Islamist polarization.

[00:08:22] **Professor Floros:** Okay. And during the dictatorship, there had been kind of enforced secular outlook to the country, is that correct?

[00:08:30] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** It is. Under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the previous dictators, they had repressed, uh, Islamist movements, Ennahda as well as Ennahda's precursors.

[00:08:39] **Professor Floros:** Okay. In an article that you published, I believe, about where leaders spent their exile, or whether they were abroad at all, you mention that being either exiled or studying in kind of Western democracies made leaders, even of Islamist parties, more moderate and that the votes on some of these controversial issues, actually they abstained on the votes, most of them, and let the secular parties vote down these more extreme Islamic references in the constitution.

Can you just talk very briefly about that dynamic and whether that assuaged people's concern about Ennahda going forward?

[00:09:30] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** So Ennahda wasn't always so moderate. They weren't always the Muslim Democrats that we think of today. Uh, in the eighties when they were first formed, uh, you did see wings of Ennahda calling for an Islamic state, calling for Sharia law, calling for the Personal Status Code that founding father of Tunisia, Bourguiba, had issued that granted women considerable rights. They wanted that to be scrapped. And so you did see very conservative, very Islamist positions initially within Ennahda. But that changed, especially in the '90s and 2000s. You see this evolution within Ennahda, this process of moderation, really. And what I argue in that article is that one cause of it is that in the nineties and 2000s, many of Ennahda's leaders had fled into exile.

Ben Ali, the dictator at the time, was, was repressing Ennahda, had a huge crackdown on Ennahda in the early nineties that led many to flee the country and especially to France and the UK, Canada, and elsewhere. And those two decades, really, abroad in the 90s and 2000s, I show shaped their ideology, partly due to socialization effects of being abroad, but partly also to interaction effects.

They, for the first time, met non-Muslims and that had positive experiences as well, and also being a minority abroad, that also led them to be more concerned about minority rights moving forward. And so, all of those processes led to this ideological evolution within the members of

Ennahda who were abroad, who after the revolution, after Ben Ali was overthrown, returned to Tunisia and helped to draft this constitution.

And so on those major divisions that we outlined earlier, this wing of Ennahda, the ones who had been in exile, found the compromise, were willing to move away from the more hardline Islamist positions and agree to what the secularists were asking for in terms of, uh, no mention of Sharia in the constitution, complete popular sovereignty, in terms of uh, equality for women, not complementarity, those sorts of compromises were facilitated by this wing who had been, uh, in exile.

[00:11:53] **Professor Floros:** It's so interesting. Okay, so, you study the military specifically, and in fact, you have a brand new book, *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring*, which is very recently out this week. So, the military in Tunisia did not step in to protect Ben Ali in 2011. And there were calls for the military to step in in 2013 and take over. So why did the military stay out of politics in 2011 and 2013?

[00:12:24] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Yeah, so I first came to Tunisia thinking that the Islamists were the most important reason why their transition succeeded, that the Islamists were more moderate, they were able to compromise, find consensus, and that's why Tunisia succeeded.

And while that's true, in part, uh, ultimately what I realized was that the military was far more important part of the story. It's because the military didn't intervene into politics that allowed all the parties to be able to compromise and find consensus. Had the military stepped in, there wouldn't have even been that chance, uh, like in Egypt when the military stepped in and made it, therefore, uh, impossible to have any sort of Tunisia scenario of a Quartet, negotiating the dialogue. And so ultimately, I decided the military was the most important part of, of Tunisia's story. And so I tried to unpack why it was that Tunisia's military doesn't intervene into politics, didn't defend Ben Ali in the 2011 revolution, didn't stage a coup in 2013.

And the initial explanation you see in the literature is that it's something about professionalism, that the Tunisian military, as a result of its history, simply became apolitical. And that is part of the story, but not the entire story, in part because despite the general professionalism in the Tunisian military, you did see some coup attempts historically. In 1962, there was a coup attempt from some military officers. In 1987, uh, there was another coup plot among officers. And so, professionalism isn't the, the entire story. And what I find in addition to professionalism is that it's also about the military's interests and composition.

Interests in the sense that under the dictatorship in Tunisia, the military was marginalized. They had been neglected materially in terms of budget and salary, but also neglected politically, kept far from politics. Very few, uh, military officers ever became ministers or governors, let alone had political influence, and thus, they were resentful in some ways towards Ben Ali. And so therefore, during the 2011 revolution, uh, there was a little interest on the military's part to preserve Ben Ali, someone who had neglected and marginalized them.

After the revolution, things improved for the military. Now, after the revolution, their budget increased more quickly than any other ministry, they saw positions as governors, they saw political influence as military advisors to the president. That marginalization reversed, in part because that's what happens under democracy. The military gets an advisory role, institutionalized in a National Security Council or as a national security advisor. Uh, and that

represented a gain for the Tunisian military and led them therefore to support the democratic transition rather than stage a coup.

The final part then focuses on the military's composition, which is that when they are neglected, like in Tunisia. When they're not a pathway to power or to wealth, the folks who come to join the military are not the elite. They're not the core power base of the dictators. The elite supporters of the dictator, they don't find a military career worthwhile. It's not their route to power or wealth. And thus, the military didn't have, politically, supporters of the dictator.

Instead, you have more of outsiders, not the dictator's insiders in the military. And that likewise helped the transition. You didn't have the especially secular coastal elite who had supported the previous dictators and who were calling now for a coup in 2013, they were fairly absent in the Tunisian military. They had been present in the very top ranks. The dictators made sure to appoint secular coastal elites to the top, but even they were removed in 2013 by the newly elected government as a form of affirmative action, to remove those privileged coastal elite to make way for some more neglected officers from the interior regions. And so that made it that their composition as well led them to ignore the calls for a coup and instead support the transition.

[00:17:00] **Professor Floros:** Great. Okay. Well, so a breakthrough occurred in 2014, thanks to the efforts of the Quartet and a new constitution was approved. The government stepped down and new elections were held. A secular party won the most seats in the parliament and their leader, Beji Caïd Essebsi, was elected president. So, first of all, can you tell me what the Quartet was and what they did to help break this impasse between the parties to create what became the 2014 constitution?

[00:17:36] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Yeah. So, the Quartet is four very strong civil society organizations in Tunisia. This is the Labor Union, the UGTT, the Employers Union, the Human Rights League, and the Order of Lawyers. The four of them together became known as the Quartet and helped to mediate the dialogue in 2013. So, in 2013, to go back a minute, you had a major crisis in Tunisia because of the divisions over the constitution, because of the secular-Islamist polarization more generally. You had mass protests in 2013 that were calling for a coup, that were asking the military to intervene just like the military had intervened in Egypt to kick out the Islamists from power.

But for the reasons I outlined earlier, the military did not intervene. And so that created an opportunity then for the civil society organizations, the Quartet, to step in instead and mediate a way out of this crisis. So, the Quartet brought together the ruling parties in the government, Ennahda, uh, and its two coalition partners, with the secular opposition, brought them to a dialogue and eventually, after months of pretty painstaking dialogue, got them to agree to a grand bargain, where Ennahda would step down from power once, uh, they came to a consensus over the constitution.

And so that's, that's what happened. And so much of the literature on Tunisia's transition and why it succeeds likewise points to the strength of civil society. Something that also has some historical origins, right? The labor union became so strong in part because it played a role in independence. It was leading some of the strikes and protests against the French to push for Tunisian independence, a role that elsewhere might've been played by the military in a war of independence. Here it was played by the labor union, which helps to explain both why down the road, civil society is stronger. The labor union is strong and the military by contrast is weak,

not having played any role in independence and having any legitimacy therefore, from independence.

[00:19:52] **Professor Floros:** Wow. Okay. And, and did-, the Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for their efforts in bringing about this compromise, right?

[00:20:01] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Exactly.

[00:20:03] **Professor Floros:** Let's take a quick break. You're listening to Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

Music interlude: Let Rivers Flow by Cast of Characters

Welcome back to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Floros, and my guest in the classroom is Sharan Grewal, an Assistant Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary, and Nonresident Fellow at The Brookings Institution.

Tunisia faced many challenges due to economic problems and a rising threat from terrorism. Can you talk a little bit about how Tunisia fared from the adoption of the constitution and the elections that brought in secular leadership until 2019 when the president died and a new president was elected. So, can you talk about that period, 2014 to 2019?

[00:21:23] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Yeah, so in 2014, Nidaa Tounes, the secular catch-all party, this party that had a, that had formed in 2012, 2013 to oppose Ennahda, they won first place, uh, led by President Essebsi. And yet, their first place, uh, wasn't enough on its own to form the government. They had to form a coalition government. They could have formed a coalition just with other secular parties, but they decided that the challenges in the country were so strong, the economic challenges, the security challenges, that what Tunisia needed at the time was a unity government.

And so Nidaa Tounes decided, President Essebsi really decided, to reach out to Ennahda and propose a unity government between them. And so, what emerged was a grand coalition government of four parties, Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda, and two junior partners that collectively had 70% of the parliament together in one government.

And this grand coalition government, this national unity government was, on the one hand, the proponents argue, necessary to deal with these challenges. The security threats, especially 2014, 2015, '16, were, were severe. 2015, Tunisia had three major ISIS terrorist attacks. 2016, you even had an incursion from Libya into the, the border town of Ben Guerdan, uh, almost taken over by ISIS-allied militants. Uh, and so security threats were severe that almost necessitated, according to the proponents of the unity government, this face of, of, of unity. But, the unity government also had some dark sides that ultimately, I think, help explain why Tunisia's transition collapsed.

The unity government created the perception that all the parties are governing together and that there is no opposition if you're, if you don't like what the government's doing. There's not an alternative. And the unity government was unable to improve the economy. They couldn't find consensus over the actual structural economic reforms that were needed. Civil society

was a bit too powerful, perhaps. The labor union and the employer's union, likewise, couldn't find consensus over the economic reforms necessary.

And thus, the perception was that the economy is worsening and yet the government is doing nothing. All these govern, all these parties governing together. They're not improving the economy, therefore they must be corrupt. Therefore, they are the impediment. They are robbing the country of its wealth and leading the economy, therefore, to collapse.

And so that populist critique gained credence because they formed this unity government. And so by the next elections, 2019, you had populists sweep these elections, all those parties that were governing together in the unity government in essence collapsed [Ennahda as the one that remained, down now to less than 20% of the vote, but still around], but instead you had populists win the next elections. The next president, Kais Saied, uh, was an unknown outsider without any political party. And that was his appeal, that he was completely untainted by the unity government and the system. Uh, and likewise, you had a number of new outsider populist parties that did perform well in the 2019 elections as well. And it's that populism that ultimately would lead to Tunisia's collapse.

[00:25:15] **Professor Floros:** Okay. So, let's dig into that a little bit. So, on July 25, 2019, President Essebsi died, and elections had been scheduled for November, but part of the 2014 constitution said that the position of the president couldn't be vacant, what, longer than 90 days, and so the elections were moved up to September. There were 2 rounds of voting. And as you mentioned, Kais Saied a retired constitutional law professor without any party affiliation was elected president. So, I guess this next part of the story will be to beware of professors in power.

(Professor Grewal laughs)

[00:25:55] **Professor Floros:** Okay. So, can you talk a little bit more about the populist positioning that Saied took during the campaign and what he promised that convinced 72.7% of second round voters to vote him into the presidency?

[00:26:14] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** So, Kais Saied's critique was that the parties had hijacked the revolution, that from the start in 2011, when parties came to power, they worked to rein in the revolution, according to Kais Saied's critique, they were only interested in their own self- and partisan interest and not in the good of the country.

They were monopolizing the country's wealth. They were corrupt. And so, Kais Saied's solution, given that diagnosis, was he was going to clean up the system. He was going to hold the political parties accountable for corruption, uh, or betraying even, the revolution. And instead he was going to create a new system in which power went straight to the people rather than being mediated by parties. And so his, one of his campaign planks was that he was going to create a new constitution, a new system in which the people would choose local councils and those local councils will send a representative to the National Assembly rather than having national level parties try to mediate the system.

So, a kind of kooky Gaddafi-esque system of power to the people, but one in which ultimately the president would be the most important and powerful figure. But beyond the critique and

the solution, that's part of his appeal, but I think the bigger part of his appeal was him as a person, his image was in essence, the outsider to the extreme.

He was untainted by any of the parties, never was part of a party, never was part of politics. Unlike any of the other candidates, they all have parties, even if they're newly created, they still seem tainted in some way. He, on the contrast, is an outsider and he seems like a man of the people. Doesn't seem to have wealth. He's, he's middle class. He takes public transportation. He said he's not going to stay in the presidential palace; he's going to keep living at home. And he has this image that he is one of the people, not like the corrupt political elite.

[00:28:21] **Professor Floros:** You could have a beer with him.

[00:28:23] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Exactly. And indeed, that was the image, that he didn't hold these big campaign rallies. Instead, he went cafe to cafe to meet people all across the country. That's the image, sort of like AOC's worn out shoes, that she's walking around to meet people. That's the image that you had of Kais Saied at the time, that he was embedded in society, one of the people.

But beyond that, so he's an ordinary person, is the image, but he's also extraordinary. And I think this helped explain why he got the populist vote. He also was viewed as incredibly intelligent. He was this constitutional law professor who really started becoming known when Tunisia was drafting the 2014 constitution. He was consulted to talk about the debates happening about the constitution. And he would appear on TV with this very monotone, almost robotic voice. He would speak formal Arabic, uh, as opposed to Tunisian dialect that the people actually speak. He would speak this very formal standard Arabic and that gave him this perception that he is really intelligent and educated and thus that he's both ordinary and extraordinary.

And that image as well, that he has this monotone robotic voice, also led to these memes that he is emotionless. He's the Robocop that's going to clean up the system. He's not going to be tempted by power. He's not going to be tempted by emotion. He is there to clean up the system. And so, all of this cult of personality made it so that he could win the populist vote, because he wasn't the only populist that was critiquing the system, but he was the only one with this image that made him seem both a man of the people, but also extraordinarily qualified to lead. And so that's in part how he won these elections in 2019 in this landslide; 72% of the vote in the second round that gave him this mandate, populist mandate, clean up the system and as we will see two years later, really take on the system.

[00:30:38] **Professor Floros:** Right. Yeah. So, he's elected in 2019 and on July 25, 2021, he froze parliament. And in September, issued Decree Number 117, which basically centered all power in the presidency, in himself. So, what happened between 2019 and 2021 that led to this very dramatic power grab?

[00:31:04] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** There were a series of crises in 2019, but mainly 2020 once COVID hit and 2021 that made it so that Kais Saied had a lot of support in taking all of the power. COVID, first of all, had major implications both on a health level. In July 2021, you had a huge spike in COVID cases. Tunisia was second highest per capita in the world. With COVID cases, there was a shortage of oxygen. They had just botched their rollout of, of COVID vaccines. So, the health crisis was severe. The economic crisis was severe, partly due to COVID

as well. It made the economy even worse than it was struggling throughout the transition. And once again, the political parties didn't seem to be doing anything about it.

Now the grand coalition government was over. Populists had won this new parliament, and there, that Parliament seemed theatrical. There were fistfights in the Parliament. None of them could get along. These new, more hardline populist factions couldn't find, uh, didn't even try to find compromise. And the result therefore is that Tunisians saw this looming health and economic crisis, the parties unable to do anything about it, and in turn, lent their support to Kais Saied to say, "Clean up the system; save us from these crises."

And so that's what Kais Saied did. On July 25, 2021, he decided to shutter the parliament, surround it with military vehicles, close the parliament, dismiss the prime minister. He, according to the 2014 constitution, had to share power, him as president with a prime minister, two executives. He instead closed the parliament, dismissed the prime minister and took all power himself.

And frankly, to a fair amount of applause from Tunisians who thought, "Yes, this is what we need. We need the revolution cleaned up. We need these corrupt political parties held to account. And we need therefore to trust Kais Saied that he is going to improve the situation and resolve these looming crises."

[00:33:21] **Professor Floros:** Why didn't he bear any of the blame for the botched vaccine rollout and the economic problems? I mean, I get that parliament, or the Assembly, was also part of government, but he was a co-executive. So how did he stay clean and the assembly took all the blame?

[00:33:41] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** So, the reality is that he does deserve some of the blame as well. He is able to say that the parliament and the prime minister were the ones in charge and that he is more of a figurehead president in the previous system. But in reality, he was also there helping to make these decisions. Both on COVID, you kept seeing disagreements between him and the prime minister about what the curfew hours should be, uh, likewise, uh, more generally on the COVID response, who should be minister of health, et cetera. And so, he does deserve some of the blame for the inability to get anything done. The inability to find compromise between the president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament. He is part of the problem.

Likewise, when we think about the constitutional court and why it was never created, uh, which might've been able to rule against him when he took all these powers on July 25, part of the reason it was never created was that he blocked any attempt to reduce the threshold needed. Uh, the parliament had to decide who the judges would be in the constitutional court, and they were too fractured to be able to come to any consensus.

But they did put forward a bill that would have reduced the threshold they needed to choose the judges, and Kais Saied decided to veto that. So, in other words, in reality, objectively, he does deserve some of the blame for why the system couldn't solve these crises. But, the image that I referred to earlier, this image that he is untainted by the political parties, he is a clean personality, that helped him to avoid and evade any of this responsibility.

It made it seem like he is still the outsider, even though he's been in government as president now for two years, but he still is the outsider because he maintains that clean image, not part of any of the political parties, seemingly above the political fray and above the political bickering. And thus, he was able to maintain that reputation, despite in reality deserving the responsibility in part for it.

[00:35:52] **Professor Floros:** Okay. And so just to kind of backtrack a little bit. So, if we're going to make really bad parallels, the constitutional court would be a little bit like the Supreme Court, but only to rule on matters of the constitution. It was provided for in the 2014 constitution, but they could never agree on its composition. And so from 2014 to the present, there is no constitutional court, and the fight in parliament was about how to appoint the judge, judges to that court. And when they tried to make it easier to do that, Saied said, "No, we're not going to do that." And so, when he takes over, there is no kind of Supreme Court to appeal to about whether or not what he did was consistent with the 2014 constitution.

[00:36:45] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Exactly. And I think it's debatable whether having a constitutional court would have saved Tunisia's democracy, right? Uh, it may not have ruled against Kais Saied, right, seeing especially the public support for what he is doing, but seeing also that Kais Saied wasn't respecting any of the state institutions.

He dissolved the parliament, ignored what the constitution was saying about, you know, a parliament needs to remain in continuous session, even when you take these emergency powers. So, it's not as if he was necessarily respecting institutions anyway. But yes, in theory, a constitutional court might have ruled against him and thus may have made his incumbent takeover a bit more difficult.

[00:37:27] **Professor Floros:** Okay. So, this has been called, this shattering the parliament, ruling by decree, has been called a self-coup. Can you explain what that means?

[00:37:38] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Yeah, so it's a way to distinguish it from a military coup, because this wasn't the military removing the president or prime minister and taking power themselves. This was the elected president taking power from within the system, from within the democratic system, similar to the *autogolpe* in Latin America with the Peru of Alberto Fujimori. That type of attempt, where the elected leader is the one dismantling democracy from within, but rapidly in a, in a self-coup, in essence, on one day, July 25, taking all of the power.

The military did still play a role. They did help to shutter the parliament. They staged, uh, stationed military vehicles outside of it. They've also put a number of opposition, uh, and dissidents on trial in military courts, but the initiator of the coup is the president. And so, the label self-coup helps to indicate that and differentiate it from a military coup.

[00:38:38] **Professor Floros:** And so, as you said, the military did play a role in this, though did not take the action of overthrowing the government themselves. But we had talked earlier about the military staying out of politics in 2011 and 2013, and yet here they are putting tanks in front of Parliament, preventing the leaders of Parliament from entering, um, after it had been suspended. So, what was different about 2021 that the military took these actions when it wouldn't get involved in 2011 and 2013?

[00:39:15] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** What I argue in the book, perhaps ironically, is that it's the same three factors, the professionalism, the interests, the composition, those three factors that earlier had led it to ignore the calls for a coup because we are professional, we are professionals, gaining from democracy in our interests, and we're not composed of the old elites. All of those led it to ignore the coup in 2013, to not stage a coup then, but those same three factors led it to support Kais Saied's power grab on July 25.

So, let me explain a bit here. Professionalism first. What the Tunisian military knows from its history is that it is subordinate to the civilian president. The dictators, historically, were the ones in charge and the military was subordinate to it. Civilian control was there, therefore, under the dictatorship. And so that's a culture that it retains today. And so on July 25, it didn't see it as professional to say no to the president. Instead, what it viewed as being professional was obeying orders, civilian control, even deferring to the president that "your action must be constitutional and legal because we have this culture of being subordinate and obeying the president." So, professionalism is part of the reason why they obeyed on July 25, ironically.

But then, it's also about their interests and composition. Their interests, again, they had been neglected under dictatorship historically. Things started to improve after the revolution, during the transition, and things improved even more under Kais Saied. He won their support in part by advancing their interests even further, appointing them for the first time as ministers, uh, the minister of health, because of COVID, military doctors were appointed as ministers of health. They ran the COVID response. Then, post-coup, they started running food security as well. The minister of agriculture was a military general. Uh, and so politically, they've seen their interests advanced as well under Kais Saied. Why, uh, another reason why they're sticking with it.

And then finally, it's about their composition. They, uh, they don't represent the old elite of the dictatorships. They represent outsiders in that sense. And they, like other outsiders, wanted change to the system. They bought into Kais Saied's populist rhetoric that the system needs to be cleaned up. These political parties are corrupt. And so, they were more susceptible to his populist critique.

And so those same reasons, professionalism, interests, and composition led them actually to support, uh, July 25 to close the parliament, to put, uh, these corrupt political parties on trial and really to support the collapse of Tunisia's democracy.

[00:42:09] **Professor Floros:** Let's take another break. My guest is Sharan Grewal, a government professor at the College of William and Mary. I'm Professor Floros, and you're listening to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

Music Interlude: Let Rivers Flow by Cast of Characters

This is Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

So, on July 25, 2022, a new constitution was approved that granted the president hyper-presidential powers, though voter turnout was only 30%. So, first, why does everything happen on July 25? Obviously, I'm sure Essebsi didn't control that he died on July 25, 2019, but the suspension of parliament in 2021 and the referendum on the new constitution in 2022 were both on July 25. So, is that an important date or just weird coincidence?

[00:43:53] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** It's a very important date. It's actually Tunisia's Republic Day when they abolished the monarchy, when Bourguiba abolished the monarchy and created a republic and so it's been celebrated every year since. And Kais Saied was trying to take advantage of that prestige of the state, uh, the strength of the state to use that day, July 25, as the day that he would seize all powers. And then since then, it's become the anniversary of his takeover, hence why he scheduled that constitutional referendum on the one year anniversary.

[00:44:22] **Professor Floros:** So, the coincidence was that Essebsi died on that day.

[00:44:25] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Yes.

[00:44:25] **Professor Floros:** Okay. (Grewal laughs) Okay. So, can you define what you mean by hyper-presidential in terms of the system that is instituted by the new constitution?

[00:44:37] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Yeah, so the old constitution was semi-presidential, where you had a president, but you also had a prime minister who was chosen by parliament, and so you had two executives that had to share executive power.

What Kais Saied did in his new constitution, 2022, is not just create a presidential system where he is the one executive and more powerful than the parliament, but also a hyper-presidential one where there aren't checks and balances. There's no one to check the president. Parliament can no longer impeach the president. That article was completely removed. The constitutional court no longer has, if it were existing, uh, the constitutional court by this constitution cannot rule against the president either and say what he does is, did is unconstitutional. So, there are no checks on the president's power in this new constitution. Uh, and that's why the hyper-presidential label is appropriate. He is the one now fully in charge of the system.

And yet it passed. The opposition boycotted in part because they didn't trust that the election would be free and fair. They were already being harassed and rounded up in military courts and civilian courts. The opposition boycotted and thus the constitution passed with lower turnout than usual, only 30%, but still Kais Saied's supporters supported this constitution. They wanted Kais Saied to have unfettered power. They didn't want, why would they want a parliament that's filled with these corrupt political parties having any check on the president? Why would they want a constitutional court that doesn't necessarily represent the people, in their mind, have a check on the president? They were supportive of giving Kais Saied all of the power because he still has this image that he is the clean personality who's going to clean up the system.

[00:46:31] **Professor Floros:** Okay. In December 2022 and January 2023, a much weakened parliament was elected with only 11% turnout. They boycotted the referendum. They, I'm assuming, boycotted parliamentary elections. What is the opposition doing? And, why didn't the 30% who turned out for the referendum also turn out to elect the new parliament?

[00:47:01] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Yeah. So, let me start there first with Kais Saied supporters, because only one third of his supporters who had turned out for the constitution turned out for the parliament, partly because as I said earlier, they want a strong presidency. They don't really care what the parliament is doing. There wasn't interest in it, but partly also

because of what Kais Saied's system is. He is trying to eliminate political parties gradually, and so for this parliamentary election, political parties were not allowed to run. They weren't allowed to campaign or finance any candidate. And so that meant that you didn't really have much of a campaign. No one had the finance to actually hold rallies and campaign across the country. And that meant that there was little interest in this parliament.

And at the end of the day, because of this new constitution, the parliament doesn't really matter anyway. They're going to be a rubber stamp. Uh, they don't have a check on the president. So, for all of those reasons, his supporters didn't really care to turn out on election day. The opposition, on the other hand, they stuck to their strategy of boycotting, hoping that that will reduce Kais Saied's legitimacy if everyone sees that only 11% are turning out for him, that that will hopefully dent his popularity.

But also, I think one reason they have been boycotting both the constitutional referendum and then the parliament is that they have also lost much of their popularity. Kais Saied's populist critique stuck to the point where the Tunisian public, many of them likewise view these political parties as corrupt, as wanting them to be dissolved. And so, it's not actually clear if they had voted no on the constitution, for instance, if they could have actually defeated Saied on the constitution.

But the final part of it, and one reason why the opposition hasn't really been able to put up a fight against this incumbent takeover, is that the opposition is still divided. Those divisions we talked about at the start of this conversation, the secular-Islamist ones, especially Ennahda versus the anti-Ennahda parties, that division still runs deep. Despite the moderation Ennahda made, the compromises Ennahda made, despite the coalition government under Essebsi, despite all of that, Ennahda's participation was never normalized.

The secular parties still view Ennahda as an Islamist, as a terrorist organization that they don't want to work with. And that's inhibiting the opposition today from uniting and opposing Kais Saied with a kind of uniform approach. There have been some attempts. There's a National Salvation Front that brought together Ennahda and some secular parties, but others are still unwilling to join, even though they all, oppose Kais Saied, but they're not coordinating protests. They're not coordinating a strategy on elections and so on. So the divisions, frankly, the secular-Islamist divisions, still run deep and really raise questions about if in Tunisia, you couldn't overcome these culture war divisions, despite Ennahda's moderating, despite a coalition government, despite doing really everything you would have hoped would work to resolve these tensions, if still in Tunisia, you can't resolve this underlying culture war division, it raises questions about whether there really is ever a way that you can overcome this ideological divide.

[00:50:46] **Professor Floros:** How has the Quartet been reacting post-2021? What are they doing?

[00:50:54] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** This is perhaps one of the saddest parts of Tunisia because it was the Quartet that won the Nobel Peace Prize for saving the transition earlier, but today has been very lukewarm and divided themselves. They have not taken a strong stance against the coup. Even immediately on July 25, some of them were supportive of the takeover, or at least cautiously supportive of it, partly because each of these civil society organizations themselves represent a number of different streams. You have Kais Saied supporters within each of these civil society organizations, which makes it so that the

leadership doesn't want to be too political, opposing Kais Saied at the risk of losing, uh, much of their membership base.

And so at this point, the civil society organizations have been quite tepid. They're saying they're working on a salvation plan to bring people together. But at this point, even, they are saying they're not going to include Ennahda in any dialogue that they were to hold. They are likewise concerned about their reputations of working with Ennahda.

And, more generally, Kais Saied is not interested in any sort of dialogue, and he himself is ignoring these civil society organizations. And I think the civil society organizations also fear that they might be repressed if they get on Kais Saied's bad side and oppose him too directly. And so, for all that reasons, Tunisia's, you know, much praised, strong civil society isn't able to resist this incumbent takeover.

[00:52:29] **Professor Floros:** Okay, so then, what is the prospect for democracy in Tunisia? I mean, when is the next presidential election? Will there be opposition able to run? Is this the end of Tunisian democracy?

[00:52:45] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** At the moment, it looks quite bleak. There will be presidential elections, most likely next year. Kais Saied, I'm sure, will win again, and I'm sure the opposition will boycott once again. I think even then, they will not trust the Electoral Commission to have a free and fair election. Probably still then, they will not have improved their popularity to the point where they might be able to beat Kais Saied. And so, I don't actually see Kais Saied losing, uh, the upcoming presidential election if it were to be held next year.

Likewise, it's hard to see a path forward to democracy anytime soon. The economy is crashing. Kais Saied hasn't been able to solve it. That in theory could hurt his popularity, but at this point he, it's not. At this point, he's still able to blame the corrupt political parties for being the cause of that economy. He's then able to blame international powers for not supporting this takeover. And he's now most recently able to scapegoat migrants, sub-Saharan African migrants, for stealing our jobs, uh, in Tunisia. And so, he's able to point fingers and still evade responsibility for the crashing economy, which means that, at this point, he still remains popular among his base, and makes it, therefore, hard to resist him, either in elections or in the street.

[00:54:08] **Professor Floros:** And he still has the military on his side?

[00:54:11] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** At this point, he still has the military, yes. They are continuing to prosecute the opposition in military courts and continuing to appear behind him in the National Security Council whenever he makes major decisions, which gives the image that they're still supportive of what he is doing, in part, because those three factors still remain. He's advancing their interests. They are composed of outsiders who want to see the system cleaned up, and they're too professional. They want to follow orders and obey the commander in chief, rather than intervening in politics, as they would call it, if they were to openly refuse an order from Kais Saied.

[00:54:48] **Professor Floros:** This is so fascinating and very sad.

If you are interested in learning more about the military in Tunisia and Egypt, you can pick up Professor Grewal's book, *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring*. Professor Sharan Grewal, thank you so much for being with me in The Politics Classroom today.

[00:55:10] **Professor Sharan Grewal:** Thank you for having me. This was a pleasure.

[00:55:12] **Professor Floros:** Professor Sharan Grewal is an Assistant Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary, and we'll spend the 2023-24 academic year at the Middle East Initiative at Harvard University. His new book, *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring*, is now available from Oxford University Press.

You've been listening to Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. If you're interested in learning more about Professor Grewal's publications, or current Tunisian politics, check out The Bookshelf section of the podcast website, thepoliticsclassroom.org.

I've started posting the podcast on YouTube, so if you like looking at waveforms while listening or want to follow along with the captions, search for "Professor Kate Floros" and subscribe to the podcast there.

I need to work on my social media game to spread the word about the podcast, but in the meantime, feel free to recommend it to your family and friends, neighbors, your dentist, anyone you think might enjoy it. If you already subscribed to the podcast, thank you. I'll be back in your feed soon, but for this week, that's all I've got.

Class dismissed.

Outro music: Three Goddesses by Third Age