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Tunisians vote on proposal to give president more power

Тунісці проголосували за пропозицію надати президенту більше повноважень

Тунісці голосують за суперечливу нову конституцію, запроповану президентом Тунісу Каїсом Саїдом, яка, на думку критиків, офіційно закріпить його захоплення влади та переверне здобуті демократичні досягнення в країні. Рік тому К. Саїд заморозив парламент Тунісу та відправив у відставку свій уряд – крок, який критики висміювали як «державний переворот», але підтримували тунісці, які розлютились на політичні еліти країни та роки економічної стагнації. За рік, що минув відтоді, К. Саїд надав собі повноваження керувати указами та звільнив десятки суддів, рішення, які спровокували низку протестів. Нова конституція наділяє посаду президента всіма повноваженнями виконавчої влади та усуває ключові стримування та противаги. Повноваження судової системи та парламенту Тунісу будуть значно скорочені. Саїд каже, що зміни необхідні для ліквідації корупції та «повернення нації на революційний шлях».

<https://apnews.com/article/africa-tunisia-constitutions-north-0eb989cdb8f0bd1de7d40c1cd4fc4bf1>



FILE - Tunisia's President Kais Saied, center, leads a security meeting with members of the army and police forces in Tunis, Tunisia, July 25, 2021. Tunisians are heading to the polls on Monday, July 25, 2022 to vote on a new constitution. The controversial initiative has been spearheaded by Tunisian President Kais Saied that critics say will legitimize his power grab in the North African nation. S (AP Photo/Slim Abid, file)

TUNIS, Tunisia (AP) — Tunisians are voting Monday for a controversial new constitution put forward by President Kais Saied that critics say will formalize his power grab and reverse hard-won democratic gains in the North African nation.

Monday's referendum marks one year to the day that Saied froze Tunisia's parliament and dismissed his government — a move derided by critics as “a coup” but celebrated by Tunisians who had grown exasperated with the country's political elites and years of economic stagnation. In the year since then, Saied has given himself the power to rule by decree and has fired dozens of judges, decisions that have provoked a series of protests.

The new constitution gives the office of the president all executive powers and removes key checks and balances. The power of Tunisia's judiciary and parliament would be greatly reduced.

Critics warn that Saied's new political structure could pave the way to a new autocracy in the country that rose up against former autocratic strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 and kicked off the Arab Spring pro-democracy protests. Tunisia is the only nation to emerge with a democracy from those protests.

Saied says the changes are needed to eliminate corruption and "return the nation to the revolutionary path."

After casting his vote in Tunis on Monday morning, Saied told the Associated Press that the referendum was a call to Tunisians everywhere "to partake in history, to create a new history."

Saied rejected fears the constitution would revive a dictatorship, saying that citizens were able to protest and express themselves freely.

"There is no dictatorship, as I said in the explanatory document on rights and freedoms: this constitution protects (such freedoms), and the revolution is defended by a people who stand up to those who undermine it."

Turnout was visibly low when polls in Tunis opened in Monday as witnessed by the AP. Many observers are expecting a low voter turnout, underscoring Tunisians' disenchantment with politics and their daily struggles coping with rising inflation that has reached 8.1%.

Officially, however, authorities are reporting high turnout numbers. Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) President Farouk Bouaskar said 6.32% of ballots had been cast by 9:30am compared with 1.6% for the same time in the 2019 elections.

Despite the scorching heat, a handful of elderly voters turned up to cast their vote. One voter, Fatma, who did not wish to give her full name, said, "I waited for this opportunity to vote for a longtime. I hope that it brings good for the Tunisian people and the country."

The drafting and organization of Monday's referendum has been marred by controversy. Sadok Belaid, a constitutional law professor Saied brought in to head the committee drafting the new constitution, has denounced the result — which was extensively revised by the president — saying it "contains considerable risks and shortcomings" that could pave the way for "a disgraceful dictatorial regime."

Saied has urged Tunisians to back the proposal, despite electoral standards requiring that he remain neutral. The vote will be supervised by the Independent High Authority for Elections, whose members he appointed.

A former constitutional law professor, Saied ran for the presidency on a populist, anti-corruption platform in 2019, winning with over 70% of the votes in the second round.

Supporters of Saied believe the new constitution will put an end to years of political deadlock.

Fatma Ben Salah, a pro-Saied civil society activist, says it's "abnormal" that the 2014 constitution gives more power to the prime minister than a president elected by a large majority. Ben Salah says Tunisia became ungovernable due to years of conflict between the three branches

of government, accentuating the economic and social crises plaguing the country whose unemployment rate stands at more than 16%.

Former Minister Hatem El Euchy believes the unification of executive power could ensure stability, revive the economy and investment and create jobs.

But for Tunisian magistrate Ahmed Souab, the constitution represents a “serious danger for democracy” because it does not guarantee a clear balance of powers and gives more prerogatives to Saied than those held by previous Tunisian strongmen.

Numerous civil society groups have rejected the new constitution. The Tunisian non-governmental group Al Bawsala says the new constitution would lead to a monopolization of power that would threaten every citizen’s rights and freedoms.

“(This) does not provide any control mechanism, even in the event of a flagrant violation of the constitution by the president,” Al Bawsala communications officer Haythem Benzid told The Associated Press.

Benzid believes Saied is relying on the widespread discontent caused by the mismanagement of public affairs in the decade since Tunisia’s revolution.

The proposed constitution has split Tunisia’s opposition. Only one party, Afek Tounes, has said it will vote against the proposal. Most political parties, including Tunisia’s influential Islamist party Ennahdha, say they plan to boycott Monday’s referendum so as not to legitimize the process.

“We refuse to go to the funeral of democracy,” said Republican Party leader Issam Chebbi, adding that he considers “the absolute personal power” that Saied wants to grant himself “worse than that of Ben Ali.”

Tunisian activist Henda Fellah tweeted Sunday that she had decided to boycott the vote, saying the text is built on a flawed foundation and that its violations of electoral law were “countless.”

“This would be the first time I’m not voting since 2011,” Fellah said.

Saied sidestepped an AP question whether a low turn out would cast doubt on the referendum’s validity.

Bouaskar, the ISIE president, said that the voting process was being monitored by 5,678 observers, including 124 foreigners.

The preliminary results are expected to be announced by Wednesday, with a final result on Aug. 28.