



Tunisia — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Tunisia, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

05/12/1881 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of France]: Tunisia became a French protectorate when the Treaty of Bardo was signed on 05/12/1881 (Crawford 2006). Nonetheless, the Convention of La Marsa, finalized on August 6th, 1883, granted France authority over Tunisia's internal matters through the office of the Resident-General. The official wielded considerable powers, including the formulation of detailed strategies—whose overarching framework was determined in Paris—and the discretion to determine negotiation approaches with local representatives (Ikeda 2015, Lewis 2013, Roberts 1986, Willoughby/Fenwick 1974). For the whole time LIED classified legislative and multiparty elections as absent as well as universal suffrage. For the given timeframe, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is also classified by us as indicating that political liberties were absent. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also limited. This period is therefore coded as a direct colonial rule regime.

06/03/1955 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of France, Liberal Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of France, Liberal Democracy]: While France officially granted internal autonomy on that date through the Conventions de l'autonomie interne, this move fell far short of genuine sovereignty or effective self-rule. The designation of the regime as - autocratic monarchy under - indirect rule colonial regime is more accurate for this transitional phase. Despite some administrative concessions to the Neo-Destour leadership under Habib Bourguiba, France retained control over key sovereign domains, including foreign affairs, defense, currency policy (through a monetary union), and overarching legal authority. The internal administration operated under heavy French supervision, and the Resident-General continued to wield decisive influence (Houssi 2017). These characteristics align with the classic model of indirect rule colonialism, where local elites are granted limited administrative powers under overarching foreign dominance. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI. According to LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held in 1955.

03/20/1956 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of France, Liberal Democracy]/Start (Monarchical) One-Party (Personalist) Autocracy [as independent country]: The Tunisian Kingdom was inaugurated as an independent realm.¹ Although the government was formally a constitutional monarchy, Habib Bourguiba (appointed as prime minister by king Muhammad VIII al-Amin) and Neo-Destour had full control of decision making from the beginning (Anderson 1986: 235, Moore 1965a: 71-75, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 102).² The monarch was purely ceremonial figurehead. A single-party system was effectively in place from the moment Tunisia achieved independence—no other party or institutional check constrained Bourguiba's rule. According to LIED, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. Because of the absence of political liberties and the lack of legislative constraints, we code this regime period as an autocratic monarchy. On 03/25/1956 a Constituent Assembly, was elected (Paxton 1986) with universal male suffrage. The Néo-Dustūr party list, headed by Habib Bourguiba received some 82% of the vote (Houssi 2017).

07/25/1957 Continuation One-Party (Personalist) Autocracy: The Constituent Assembly voted to abolish the monarchy and proclaimed a republic on this date (Paxton 1986). Bourguiba became the provisional head of state. In 1959 with the approval of a new constitution universal suffrage was introduced.³ In 1960 the people elected Bourguiba president of the Tunisian Republic (Houssi 2017). In 1964 the sole party Neo-Destour was renamed Socialist Destourian Party.⁴ As classified by FH for this regime period, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and not really present according to V-Dem's PCLI. Since 1958, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held, but they were not categorized as multiparty.

03/01/1975 End One-Party (Personalist) Autocracy/Start Personalist Autocracy: From the start the regime had a strong personalist note and in March 1975 Habib Bourguiba was declared President-for-life by the Chamber of Deputies. For this reason, there were no more presidential elections until 1989.⁵ According to our classification rules, the appointment of a president for life means that there has been a regime change towards a personalist autocracy, although the ruling elite has not changed. Furthermore, even the one-candidate presidential elections no longer took place, which means that there were no direct or indirect popular multi-party/multi-candidate executive (s)elections. The cult of personality around Habib Bourguiba is an additional feature.⁶ Legislative elections in November 1979 were neither free nor fair, the PSD running unopposed. On 11/01/1981, following changes to the constitution that allowed for multiple parties the regime de facto was still dominated by Habib Bourguiba and the PSD. The PSD now contested the elections as the lead party of the National Front in alliance with the Tunisian General Labour Union and other minor parties, and according to official results, won all seats.⁷ Political liberties were absent according to LIED and not really present according to V-Dem's PCLI. Until 1979, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. From 1980 onwards, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held, but they were not categorized as multiparty. Per FH, for 1975 to 1980, the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. The FH-score for 1981 is missing. As classified by FH for 1982 to 1985, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. As classified by FH for 1986 and 1987, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free.

11/07/1987 End Personalist Autocracy/Start One-Party (Personalist) Autocracy: On this date, doctors declared Habib unfit for duty and prime Minister Zine el Abidine Ben Ali declared himself president in conformity with the constitution. The ruling party was again renamed in Democratic Constitutional Rally, but the ruling elite stayed the same.⁸ Per FH's evaluation for 1988, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. Per FH's scoring for 1989, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. As classified by FH for 1990 and 1991, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. According to FH's classification for the years 1992 to 1999, a score between 11 and 14 makes the country not free, which we also place in the not free category. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and not really present according to V-Dem's PCLI. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. On 04/02/1989 for the first time since 1974 presidential elections have been held and for the first time in the parliamentary elections on this date oppositional parties were allowed. However, based on the official results they did not receive any seats in the parliament.⁹ For the first time the Ennahda Movement fielded independent candidates, because Ben Ali had banned the party from participating.¹⁰ Also, only Ben Ali was standing for election as president.¹¹ Therefore, based on the observations Tunisia under Ben

Ali is coded as one-party autocracy, even for the period following 1989 because there were still no (direct or indirect) popular multi-party/multi-candidate executive (s)elections and political parties like the Ennahda Movement were banned and persecuted. According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held, but they were not categorized as multiparty.

10/24/1999 End One-Party (Personalist) Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date, general elections took place to elect a president and parliament. The presidential election witnessed an unprecedented occurrence: the presence of multiple candidates for the first time in history.¹² However, Ben Ali received 99 per cent of the vote. In the parliamentary elections the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally received more than 91 per cent of the votes. The country is in this period a borderline case between an electoral autocracy and a one-party autocracy. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Following LIED the elections are not competitive for the entire time. V-Dem's CEI declares irregularities in the election process by no cleanliness scores. Moreover, the overall election conditions are not free and fair according to V-Dem's EF&FI. According to FH's classification for the assessed regime period, a score between 11 and 14 makes the country not free, which we also place in the not free category. Additionally, political liberties were absent according to LIED and not really present following V-Dem's PCLI. This changed in 2011, when the PCLI is classified by us as showing that political liberties were present. According to Polity5, from 1999 to 2001, the executive encountered slight limitations on decision-making power imposed by other institutions. From 2002 to 2010, the executive experienced minimal limitations on decision-making, placing it in the first intermediate category. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

01/14/2011 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Democratizing Regime: On this date, Ben Ali was ousted. In the course of the Tunisian Revolution, also called the Jasmine Revolution, all members of the cabinet associated with Democratic Constitutional Rally as the ruling party resigned on 02/27/2011 (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 102). In response to the ongoing protests and the demands of the Tunisian people, Mohamed Ghannouchi, who was rooted in the old regime, resigned from his position as prime minister on 02/27/2011. He was replaced by Béji Caïd Essebsi, who served as the interim prime minister.¹³ No data was provided by LIED for this specified period. Per FH, for this regime period, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, whereas V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are present.

10/23/2011 End Democratizing Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, the first free and fair elections in Tunisia's history took place. The new constitution adopted in 2014 was "regarded as a milestone in North Africa's political history and the region's most progressive and democratic constitution".¹⁴ Following the 2011 revolution, Tunisia witnessed sluggish progress in judicial reform despite constitutional mandates for a robust and independent judiciary. Many judges from the Ben Ali era persisted in their roles, and successive governments frequently attempted to influence court proceedings. The constitution affirmed the right to assemble and demonstrate peacefully, and public protests addressing political, social, and economic concerns were a common feature of political life. However, the enactment of a contentious counterterrorism law in 2015 and the recurrent imposition of states of emergency placed significant limitations on public demonstrations. Exclusive eligibility for the presidency was restricted to Muslims, and societal biases alongside laws criminalizing homosexuality hindered the active political engagement of many LGBT+ individuals, with political parties largely neglecting their concerns. Nevertheless, elections during this period have been competitive and free and civil liberties have been mostly upheld.¹⁵ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since 2011 the elections score competitiveness (LIED). Between 2012 and 2019 V-Dem's CEI affirms electoral standards in Tunisia as clean. In 2020 the scores decreased to a somewhat cleanliness. Nevertheless, the elections were free and fair for the entire period, according to V-Dem's EF&FI. According

to FH, a score of 6 to 7 for the years 2011 to 2013 designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free. Per FH, for 2014-2016, the country is classified as free, scoring between 2 and 4, which we also place in the free category. According to FH, for 2017 to 2020, the country is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. Per FH, for 2021, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. LIED indicates that political liberties were absent. Whereas V-Dem's PCLI affirms full political liberties for the entire time. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. President Kais Saïed announced the dismissal of the government due to continuing protests caused by an increasing number of coronavirus cases and declining economic growth. He disbanded the Parliament in order to rule by decree expanding his executive authority and ignoring certain constitutional norms.¹⁶ The nation's preeminent parliamentary faction, Ennahda, decried the president's maneuvers as constituting a coup d'état. This characterization was echoed by certain political commentators and legal scholars. Saïed defended his choice to implement the measures by citing Article 80 of the Tunisian constitution, which grants the president the authority to enact exceptional measures when the country's institutions, security, or sovereignty are jeopardized.

07/25/2021 End Electoral Democracy/Start Electoral Hybrid Regime: On this date, President Kais Saïed suspended the government, dissolved the lower house of the parliament and issued a month-long curfew. This self-coup was preceded by political deadlock and protests against the government. In October, the President directed Najla Bouden to establish a new government. In July 2022, a revised constitution, granting the president greater authority, was ratified following a referendum that was abstained from by more than two-thirds of voters.¹⁷ Parliamentary elections were planned for 12/17/2022. Nearly all opposition parties boycotted the elections. Therefore, the voter turnout in the first round was only about 11 percent.¹⁸ Saïed's authoritarian tactics concerning his opponents raise alarm. In the initial days of September 2021, Human Rights Watch condemned his "repressive policies." Delivering a speech on 09/20/2021, from Sidi Bouzid, the birthplace of the uprising against Ben Ali, the president issued a vaguely worded encouragement to violence, mentioning "traitors" and calling on citizens to "cleanse the country." By 11/2021, Amnesty International reported a surge in military court trials in Tunisia, surpassing the number witnessed in the entire previous decade.¹⁹ The 2021 self-coup may give the appearance of a personalist autocracy; however, the president's actions were not entirely unconstitutional, and institutional structures were subsequently reinstated—albeit in a weakened form. The polity did not collapse into a state of near-total institutional absence or unconstrained personal rule. Nevertheless, the self-coup constituted a clear violation of the constitutional separation of powers and the system of checks and balances. Accordingly, the regime is classified as an electoral autocracy due to the erosion of horizontal accountability and the undermining of constitutional constraints. In March 2022 President Saïed formally dissolved the parliament after it attempted to vote against his emergency measures by convening online. In June the President drafted a new constitution which shifted power away from the legislative to the executive branch of government, which was approved in a referendum which FH marks as flawed, with low turnout of 31%. Elections for a new parliament were held in December with a second round in January 2024, featuring extremely low turnout at 11%, a lack of candidates and a boycott by opposition parties. Government critics continue to be persecuted.²⁰ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. In 2021 the elections were not competitive (LIED). The election slides back to an ambiguous cleanliness in 2021, no cleanliness in 2022 and an ambiguous outcome in 2023 (V-Dem CEI). V-Dem's EF&FI indicates ambiguous election conditions for the following two years. According to FH, a score of 6 to 8 for the assessed regime period designates the country as partly free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather free and rather not free. LIED identifies political liberties as absent (for 2021), while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are somewhat present. In 2021, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive. In 2022, V-Dem's JCE is

interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive. In 2023, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating moderate constraints on the executive. Additionally, the LDI showed an ambiguous score for 2021, referring to an electoral hybrid regime, while the scores for 2022/23 indicated that the country moved into the direction of an electoral autocracy.

10/06/2024 End Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start Electoral Autocracy: The Presidential election was held in October, marking the first since the 2022 constitutional reform. Incumbent President Kais Saied secured a second term with 90.7% of the vote. However, the election process was marred by significant controversy. The Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) disqualified several opposition candidates, including prominent figures like Mondher Zenaïdi and Imed Daïmi, despite court orders for their reinstatement. Additionally, the parliament amended the electoral law shortly before the election, transferring oversight from the Administrative Court to the Court of Appeal of Tunis, a move critics argued undermined judicial independence and electoral integrity. Ayachi Zammel, a leading opposition candidate, was imprisoned and sentenced to over thirteen years in prison on charges of false sponsorship, a decision widely viewed as politically motivated to eliminate competition.²¹ According to V-Dem's EF&FI CEI neither free nor fair and not really clean. V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. As classified by FH for this regime period, the country scores a 10 as partly free, which we interpret as rather not free. Regarding political liberties, they were in an ambiguous state according to V-Dem's PCLI. Electoral Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Axtmann 2007, Entelis/Tessler 2013, Erdle 2010, Moore 1965b, Breivik Andersen 2011, Moore 1970)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Tunisia

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo_Destour

³ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2008

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Destourian_Party

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1974_Tunisian_general_election

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cults_of_personality#Tunisia

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_Tunisian_parliamentary_election

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zine_El_Abidine_Ben_Ali

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1989_Tunisian_general_election

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ennahda>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1989_Tunisian_general_election

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1999_Tunisian_general_election

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beji_Caid_Essebsi

¹⁴ <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019C13/>

¹⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2020>

¹⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022%E2%80%9323_Tunisian_parliamentary_election;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Tunisian_self-coup

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022%E2%80%9323_Tunisian_parliamentary_election

¹⁹ <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/coup-in-tunisia-is-democracy-lost/>

²⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2024>

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Tunisian_presidential_election

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