What the small country Tunisia teaches us about democratic backsliding in the U.S. – and what not

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Albeit being a small North African country, Tunisia is one of the most recent examples of democratic backsliding. While the comparison with the long-time democratic United States in this matter seems far away, I argue in this article that there are parallels between these two countries.

Democratic Backsliding describes in both cases the situation where an elected president profoundly modifies the political system. The underlying processes underlying democratic backsliding in Tunisia could equally apply in the U.S., where Trump attempts to sideline parliamentary and judicial control since early 2025.

More examples of *democratic backsliding* around the world

In fact, nothing should surprise attentive democratization scholars. Democratic backsliding today is often influenced by an elected incumbent who gradually extends power (Balderacchi & Tomini, 2024), sometimes also linked to polarization between government and opposition Gessler & Wunsch, 2024). We have already seen examples of earlier backsliding through an elected president in Turkey (Gumuscu, 2023), Hungary (Bogaards, 2018), or Poland (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). In addition, democratization scholars already underscored the outcome of the first Trump presidency for democracy (Mickey

et al. 2017), but as global indices show, this came back to nearly same levels after the end of the presidency (VDem 2025). Given the precedent wave of backsliding and the current modifications, this time it may be different and show robust long-establish safeguards are.

The face of *democratic backsliding* in Tunisia

The most visible commonality between Tunisia and the U.S. is an elected president that seeks to extent power. In the Tunisian case and albeit being a young democracy, the elected president, Saied had always a different perspective on how politics should function in comparison to the parliament (Gobe, 2022). Key elements for the power grasp that cumulated in the 2022 dissolution of parliament and the following new constitution were the role how Saied was framed, but also economic developments and growing dissatisfaction with democracy, partly fueled by Saied himself.

Democratic backsliding in Tunisia happened on a timeframe from 2022 to 2024. It included taking control of the judiciary by dismissing judges as well as the dissolution of parliament, before drafting a new constitution. The process was accompanied by an ambivalent position of Saied towards democracy and the referral to conspiracy theories (Fulco & Giampaolo 2023). Parts of civil society did not react at the beginning as they supported the fight against corruption or agreed on (some) positions and because of ambivalent positions of the elected president.

Similarities with the US

At least some of these elements sound very familiar for the U.S., while others do not. Tunisia for example only saw about 10 years of democratic rule and hadn’t any constitutional court at the time of backsliding. Economic development was in stagnation and the president had no links to political parties. The uncertainty and unemployment that led to democratic backsliding in Tunisia are not that relevant for the U.S. However, it may be that President Trump is creating a stress by firing state bureaucrats and by fueling uncertainty in all sectors when it comes to federal finance, tariffs or emerging economic pressure. This uncertainty then has the potential to create additional frustration, framing the narrative of an “urgency” to modify the political system.

Alterations of the judiciary may have already begun, although it is questionable whether the Supreme Court will ultimately grant the desired extension of presidential powers, effectively overturning the constitution. This would render the judges’ work obsolete, except for justifying presidential decrees. The same applies to Congress. By showing disrespect for parliamentary decisions, particularly those related to the budget, President Trump is effectively doing what President Saied did in Tunisia: ruling by decree and sidelining parliament. This approach will continue until parliamentarians perceive their political work as increasingly obsolete, as the system shifts towards a stronger presidential role. This issue transcends party lines, affecting both Republicans and Democrats. It is fundamentally about representation, parliamentary jobs, and the power of parliamentarians. It seems unlikely that the U.S. Congress will be dissolved, but it is not

impossible that President Trump will emphasize that the parliament is hindering his work and express the need for more powers.

Regarding Trump's first presidency, Carothers & Hartnett (2024) argued that U.S. democracy functioned because democratic backsliding led to him not being re-elected. In the U.S. context, this will already be evident during the midterm elections. However, if conflicts between parliament and the president arise, it may be up to the judiciary to decide who is right. But if the judiciary is not independent from the president or is overwhelmed by other requests, nothing will happen. We are far from a constitution being overthrown, but why shouldn't an elected president ask for a constitutional referendum and mobilize his supporters to modify the system accordingly, as Saied did in Tunisia?

To what extent are institutions in the US stable and resilient?

While it is easy to reject that the U.S. may be like Tunisia, the question is whether we should rely on the assumed stability of U.S. democracy. Only because the scenario seems unbelievable or esteemed unlikely does not mean that it cannot happen. Given the current speed of modifications – and the obvious decisions that do not fall in the competency of the president – democratic backsliding in the U.S. may happen with unprecedented speed. This speed is, however, also a sign that all this is well-prepared.

Elected presidents that seek to monopolize power play a lot on ambiguity, on doing things that could be interpreted differently, by overwhelming control instances or by claiming "that is what I announced, and I got elected for this". Fast actions furthermore show an output orientation and a will for change that may be appreciated by own partisans. However, the vote for a president is often less concrete than for example support for different measures. For an elected president it is still easy to say "See, that is what the people want."

But what are Americans currently willing to accept? How far goes democratic backsliding for the 'promise' of greatness and efficiency? Creating uncertainty and taking measures with the need of urgency to fight corruption or referring to some kind of abstract enemy is part of this process. This abstract enemy then over time becomes also parliament or – as we already saw earlier – the judiciary. Parliament and judiciary become "woke" or whatever term is used to say that it runs against the presidential opinion. Continuing in this narrative, only the elimination of these controls will enable the elected president to fulfill the will of the people.

The reality of democratic backsliding is not something the electorat wishes for

The reality is that the people will gradually loose it's influence via parliament or directly, civil liberties get restricted, and the final profiteer is a president and the surrounding people that build patronage networks to their own benefits. Temporality and speed are something that plays in favor of an elected president that wants to take over absolute control as control by courts is slow and takes time, at least until the final decision is reached.

Democratization scholars may now warrant that democratic backsliding and maximizing power of the president leads to legitimacy problems (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019) . However, what if the elected parliament – contrary to the weak Tunisian parliament – supports the president, as was the case in Turkey for example (Gumuscu, 2023)? There are still many scenarios possible, and the temporality and reactions of different institutional actors are important. However, what happened in the first weeks is a direct attack on the functioning of U.S. democracy and it is currently unlikely that this stops here.

The ugly Déjà-vu

As a democratization scholar it is hard to see things repeat over time, while always thinking that this is not applicable to other countries; but visibly it is. We have seen enough authoritarian regimes based on patronage networks in the Middle East and Northern Africa (de Elvira et al. 2018) and there are too many parallels to ignore. Once established these systems show relatively robust against re-democratization. When thinking about building patronage networks, gaining control and redistributing key resources and focusing on loyalty or building on family and friends come to mind. And at the same time putting pressure on independent safeguard institutions, including financial pressure, is part of sidelining criticism.

Newer research also underscores that democratic backsliding is not necessarily a failure of democracy in bringing desired results, but a failure to stop individuals from tactics that lead to maximizing power and democratic backsliding (Carothers & Hartnett, 2024). In this sense, it seems surprising that really large scale protest is not yet visible in the U.S. The question is also against what exactly to protest given the magnitude, rapidity, but also durability, of changes. And even if autocratic rule is not the final aim, democratic safeguards and processes that shall prevent backsliding become at least damaged and could enable future autocrats.

Now you will say the U.S. are that different compared to Tunisia, and yes, certainly, but only if democratic safeguards function correctly, that are parliament, civil society, judiciary, federalism and the media. And perhaps it is even more worrying for democracy that rapid actions by an elected president may indeed prevent fast reactions by other institutions in the most well-established democracies.

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