

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT  
Online Event

**“Tunisia – What Now?”**

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FEATURING  
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*Chairman, House Democracy Partnership; Member, House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs*

**Mohamed Malouche**  
*Chairman, Tunisian American Young Professionals*

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*Executive Director, Solidarity Center*

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Jon B. Alterman

Good morning. I'd like to welcome you to CSIS. I'm Jon Alterman, the Senior Vice President and Brzezinski Chair, Director of the Middle East Program here. Democracy is the rule of the people, but which people, when, and for how long? Kais Saied's election as president of Tunisia in October of 2019 represented the Tunisian people's repudiation of their political class. And his freezing of parliament alone more than a month ago won wide support. Tunisians see Saied as incorruptible because, in a country in which politicians have long sought wealth and power, Saied's prior career demonstrated a pointless disinterest in either.

The challenge for Tunisia has long been one of institutions. Under Bourguiba and Ben Ali a strong presidency stunted the growth of other institutions. After the revolution in 2011, Tunisia's parliament was slow to build capacity. The military and security services remained intentionally weak. And the presidency that Saied occupies was intentionally left weak as well. As Americans who have sought to bolster Tunisia's democratic transition, we are struggling with a dilemma. Should we support a stronger presidency? Or does that carry with it the seed of a return to dictatorship? How can we help engender a more effective legislature? And more broadly, how should we think about authoritarian actions that win popular support? Does their support render them democratic? Or should we insist on institutional solutions over the objections of a popular leader?

To help us think through many of these issues we have Congressman David Price from the Fourth District of North Carolina, and the co-chair of the bipartisan House Democracy Partnership. My friend and colleague Ms. Flacks will then lead a discussion with a superb panel of experts. Congressman Price, please go ahead.

Representative David Price (D-NC)

Well, thank you and good morning, all. Thank you for inviting me to kick off this discussion. It's a really important discussion.

And just now you framed the issues, I think, in a very helpful way. And they are genuine dilemmas as we confront the current political crisis in Tunisia, our hopes for the country's future and our questions about what our country's stance should be, and what kind of direction we should aim for. I have had an engagement with Tunisia channels through two – channel in two ways. First, my work as the chair of the House Democracy partnership, which is formally partnered with Tunisia's National Assembly. And my work on the House Appropriation's State Department and Foreign Operations Subcommittee. So I'll refer to those engagements briefly, and then hope that I can frame the questions in a useful way.

Foreign assistance to Tunisia, speaking of the SFOPS subcommittee, has increased markedly in the years following the adoption of the 2014 constitution, reaching almost 200 million dollars annually at this point. Between fiscal years 2015 and 2021, the average was about 179 million

dollars per year. And the Trump administration, as you all probably know, proposed drastic – quite drastic cuts in that. That was rejected squarely by the U.S. Congress on a bipartisan basis. The earlier pattern of appropriations for Tunisia had been much more modest, about 17 million dollars per year in the previous years.

The House Democracy Partnership is a bipartisan commission of some – of 20 members from both parties and has been working with Tunisia for almost our entire 15-year life. It has also involved a lot of observation on the ground, including the aid programs and the kind of help they provided. And so we've seen, and have come to appreciate and come to defend, the health services, education, economic development, security coordination and training, and the anti-terrorism training. All of those part of that aid package, and a sign, I think, of our country's support – bipartisan support for democratic development in Tunisia, a very singular exception to other patterns in the Arab Spring and the Middle East.

The House Democracy Partnership has – I'll just give a word about what we do and why the engagement with Tunisia was kind of a natural for us and one that we gave great emphasis – we engaged these parliaments. We're the successor to the old Frost-Solomon Commission for Central and Eastern Europe. We got going 15 years ago. We engaged parliaments and emerging democracies, member to member, staff to staff, in a legislative strengthening mode; strengthened best practices on various topics, ranging from oversight to budgets to ethics to constituent representation, whatever is relevant to that particular country and that particular parliament.

Of course, the learning process always goes both ways. We readily acknowledge that for all of our countries, including our own. Democracy is a work in progress. I just returned, in fact, from a conference in the Marshall Center in Garmisch, Germany, meeting with MPs from five partner countries – Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Ukraine. We addressed a whole range of topics important to those parliaments – oversight of the executive, dealing with disinformation, gender mainstreaming, as we called it, and so on. It was our way of getting going again after 18 months of Zoom meetings.

But there's really no substitute for bilateral visits. And we have felt that particularly in relation to Tunisia. We've made seven visits to Tunisia as a delegation, starting in 2011, during the interim-government period, before the constitution was written or adopted and before parliamentary elections. We've been back since then a number of times and have regularly engaged Tunisian MPs and staff in Washington and in regional meetings and workshops.

We've managed to continue the relationship through the pandemic, although in an attenuated way. We've had engagements, I think, some seven times. In fact, the first program – I do remember this very well – the first program

after the pandemic struck, we got Tunisian MPs from three party groups in succession on Zoom meetings, where we had, I thought, very good and actually technical discussions about how the pandemic was being dealt with, but also how their institution was functioning.

So we do care about the country. And we've been gratified by the robust engagement from all parliamentary factions, including Ennahda. All the factions have engaged with us. And so we're, of course, attentive to what's going on now and, like all of you, trying to figure out the best course forward.

All of you know the history of how Tunisia's – how the constitutional assembly and then the parliament managed to bring disparate factions together to draft an inclusive constitution and then to address the country's challenges legislatively. They never have successfully addressed the need for a constitutional court, apropos of the present crisis, where the appeal normally would lie, to what the president has done.

One of the costs of parliamentary struggles and parliamentary paralysis has been a failure to set up that full constitutional structure. But, of course, this isn't the first time that these difficulties have occurred. The constitutional process faltered in 2013, and that's when the National Dialogue Quartet, consisting of Tunisia's largest union and leading business and legal and human-rights organization, brokered talks among rival factions. And that's what they got the Nobel Peace Prize for, quite deservedly.

And then there was another critical juncture after the 2014 election, presidential elections. The staunch secularist who won the most votes and the leader of Ennahda, the country's dominant Islamist party and dominant in the parliament, put their rivalry temporarily aside and formed a coalition government to promote accommodation and stability as the government continued to find its footing.

Tunisia thus made a successful if halting transition, partly because, although as we heard a moment ago, its institutions were fragile, those institutions were not – you could argue, I think, the institutions were not as hollowed out as was true of other Arab Spring countries. There was – there were some elements of civil society that were active and could be activated. They retained some resilience, and there were leaders who understood that. There were leaders from various sectors who saw the importance of ensuring inclusive institutions, governing institutions, and strengthening them. So that's the scene on which the House Democracy Partnership has come and to which we have tried to contribute.

The ensuing years have been difficult, have been challenging. As a political culture that encouraged the seeking of consensus, sometimes that being a strength, a virtue, it's also hampered bold and decisive policymaking, one could argue, and fostered a kind of political paralysis.

So democracy did not pay off in the – quite literally, pay off in the way that many Tunisians expected in terms of their economic hopes and expectations. COVID only added to the troubles and to the discontent, and that failure to establish a full constitutional structure, including the Constitutional Court, now comes back to be a very, very important failure.

The established political parties and candidates increasingly fell into disfavor. That included Ennahda. It included all the parties, giving way in the 2019 elections to independent and noncareer politicians, the most prominent of which, of course, is President Kais Saied, and he's now used his disputed emergency powers or taking them to disputed levels to assure absolute control of government. Took that to another level on August 24th with the suspension of parliament and the extension of his emergency powers indefinitely.

Accompanying this have been ominous arrests and raids on the part of security forces, targeting politicians, journalists, civil society leaders, and other very, very ominous developments. So Friends of Tunisia and supporters of democratic development in Tunisia are concerned by these developments and I think we need to be concerned.

So what now? That's the topic of today's discussion, and I will listen as long as I can and very much want to – want to hear the conclusions that you have come to. Brings us to the topic of today's discussion. Among other things, that's the question of what the U.S. response should be.

How do we continue to bolster the elements in Tunisian society, Tunisian politics and society, that have fought so hard for democratic change? This is a country that has been touted, quite rightly, as a democratic success story. Always fragile, but many peaceful transfers of power, many successful accommodations to difficult situations.

This has been an important decade of achievement and has, I think, excited our admiration, our desire to be supportive, but now our very deep concern. I think we need a consistent and clear response. We do need to say decisively that the suspension of democratic institutions and of a duly respected parliament – duly elected parliament is not the answer. The suspension must end. The suspension must end, and a legitimate process of governance must be restored.

Parliament must be included in determining the way forward for the country and that can and should include reforms in the institution itself. As in previous crises, the role of Ennahda and its leader, Speaker Ghannouchi, is critical. That seems to be in some process of evolution at present. Ghannouchi was quite outspoken against the president's moves initially. He seems to have softened that stance.

Not quite sure what that means. Some accommodation to the public opinion, popular opinion, no doubt, and – but there needs to be a settlement and accommodation that most certainly includes the parliament and its leadership.

The international community, particularly the United States, France, and the EU, must work alongside Tunisian partners, stakeholders in parliament and civil society to breach this impasse and create a lasting way forward. There must be no doubt as to where our country stands, and of our willingness to use our leverage, if need be, to help encourage and prompt a return to democratic governance, whatever exactly that looks like. We do have leverage. Tunisia depends on loans and aids bilaterally and from international institutions. And Saied, by the way he proceeded, showed concern for how his moves might be received internationally. That seems pretty clear, that these have been staged in what some are now calling a gradual coup, so as to give him room to maneuver if he needed to, to reverse course if necessary. And of course, we need to give him every reason to reverse course.

He is claiming, with some justification, popular support – widespread popular support for his – for his moves. Not clear how far that extends or what might – what might turn that popular support in the direction of a return to democratic governance. There certainly has been strong evidence in Tunisia for a decade now – from 2011 onward – of the Tunisian people’s desire quite broadly to pursue a democratic course. We should, of course, support that aspiration. And one hopes that, looking back to the way past crises have gone, that the elements of civil society – today’s equivalent of that Quartet – will assert itself, will give some shape to popular aspirations for democratic development.

It would be tragic to lose this progress that Tunisia has made. I also think it’s unnecessary to lose it, or at least that is my hope and my impression for now. I’d be interested in what the rest of you have to say. This is still a fluid situation. It’s a situation that can and, I believe, will respond to our diplomacy, to other – the leverage and the diplomatic efforts exercised internationally. And so I do think it’s a moment to seize. We must figure out how to exert ourselves effectively and do so. There, I hope, is still time, but there’s no time to lose. Thank you very much.

Marti Flacks

Thank you very much, Congressman, for your remarks and for all the work that you’re doing in Tunisia and around the world. We really appreciate you taking the time to be with us here today.

I want to now turn to our expert panel to really delve into some of these issues that have been raised by the congressman and by Dr. Alterman. For those who are watching at home on Zoom, if you want to ask questions to our panel you can use the Q&A button at the bottom of your Zoom screen. And for those who are watching on our CSIS website, you can use the “ask

live question” button and enter your question in the box there, and we will receive it.

So I’m going to start by introducing our really distinguished panel today for what I hope is going to be a really insightful and helpful discussion about what exactly is going on in Tunisia and where we go from here.

I’m going to start with Ms. Jebali. She is president of the Free Sight Association, a Tunisian NGO that works to engage and educate Tunisians about gender equality, human rights, and democracy. It works to create innovative programs to train a new generation of women leaders to address difficult issues, including, I’m sure, many of the ones that we are going to talk about here today. So thank you, Arbia, for joining us.

We also have with us Mr. Malouche. He is a member of the board of the Tunisian American Enterprise Fund and chair of the Tunisian American Young Professionals. That’s a diaspora association that seeks to increase economic cooperation, ties, and exchanges between Tunisia and the United States. He also has over 20 years of experience designing public sector modernization, economic growth, and local governance programs with Deloitte Afrique. So with one foot in Tunisia and one in the United States, you bring an extremely important perspective to this conversation. So thank you.

And finally, we have Ms. Bader-Blau. She is the executive director of the Solidarity Center. She served in that role since 2011. Solidarity Center is the largest global worker rights organization based in the United States, with more than 200 staff here and 30 field offices around the world. And Shawna particularly is a leading advocate helping to link the human rights community with the labor movement and their efforts to protect worker rights, so she sits – Shawna, you sit right at the intersection of many of the issues we’re going to talk about here today. So thanks very much for being here.

So I want to start off to our panel with some framing questions, just to help us set the scene a little bit. Arbia, I’m going to start with you, to help us understand how we arrived at this situation. What are the factors that you think directly led to the suspension of – the firing of the prime minister, the declaration of the state of emergency? What are the most important factors that you think brought us – brought Tunisia to this point today?

Arbia Jebali

Perhaps it can be – it can be said that the current political crisis in Tunisia is not the result of the moment but, rather, a reflection of the state of popular discontent and accommodation imposed by the failure of Ennahdha movement management of the country since 2011 and to now in all political, economical, and social fights. And the most permanent reason is that led – that led to it can be addressed as follows: Firstly, the crisis of the 2014 constitution; secondly, the conflicted atmosphere in the parliament; thirdly,

the absence of the role of constitutional court. All these reasons make Tunisia in this situation now.

I'll explain a little bit what means this for reason according to us.

The crisis of the 2014 constitution. Many trends in Tunisia see that the current crisis is a direct result of 2014 constitution, which contained problems that reduced the ability of the state institution to confront the many crises that escalated in the past seven years, which was evident in the crisis of the spread of COVID-19 virus. According to the so-called Ennahd constitution, which was defended by the Ennahdha movement and enhanced its influence and control, and which combines the presidential and parliamentary systems, led to an escalation of differences over the power between the elected president of the republic and the appointed head of government.

The second reason is the conflicted atmosphere in the parliament and its deviation from its principal mission of representing the people and serving their interests at the legislative level as bilateral conflict continued, and practices of violence and incitement against it, and hate speech multiplied, and the level of deputy practice decreased to the point of beating and obscene speech, which made the toxic atmosphere and negatively affect the country's situation and disgust everybody.

The third reason: Absence of the role of constitutional court. The continued and complete formation of the constitutional court led to the absence of its judicial role in spreading the three authorities and decision – deciding on the disputed risks which had a role in the escalation of the crisis between the three authorities: the president of the state, parliament, and the prime minister, especially in light of the different interpretation of the constitutional text and the attempts of some parties, especially the Ennahdha movement, to confiscate more power, whether at in the internal or external level.

The fourth reason is the escalation of the impact of current pandemic and its economic persecution– the unprecedented health crisis Tunisia is experiencing in light of the spread of the pandemic of COVID-19 deteriorated condition of the health sector, especially in light of continuous escalation in recent weeks of case, especially in June and July. Tunisia, according to the World Health Organization, is the highest in Africa and the Arab world in terms of daily cases, with positive result reaching 30 percent of the daily tests, which has increased popular fears of the current government's inability to contain the crisis and combat the epidemic, especially in light of slow vaccination campaign and shortage of vaccines.

This, in addition to the draft of health emergency law which was submitted by Tunisian government to parliament and was expected to be presented to the plenary session during the last week of July 2021, sparked a new

controversy and problematic between the prime minister and the president of the republic about the extent of which the constitution is respected and the power granted to each of them regarding – concerning declaring the state of emergency. And the draft stipulates that a state of health emergency be declared by the two of government order and proposal from the minister of the interior and health, even as – even though the state of republic emergency according to the constitution only within the powers of the president of republic.

Ms. Flacks

Thank you, Arbia, for that. That was a great overview of some of the really important factors. And I want to dig into some of those.

But let me bring in Mohamed for a similar question. You know, you, as I said, sit sort of at the intersection of Tunisia and the United States in the diaspora, and working primarily on economic issues. Did you see some of the concerns Arbia mentioned sort of play out in the area that you're working as well in terms of lack of functioning institutions? And were those warning signs available and visible to you too?

Mohamed  
Malouche

Well, thank you for the invitation, first of all.

But I think I echo a little bit what Arbia said. I think what led us to this situation is certainly an economic and social situation in Tunisia that has been worsening for a number of years now as a result of poor governance, of governments that did not have time to implement reforms; as a consequence, you know, I think economic and social situations certainly. But also to that you add the sanitary situation that was poorly managed, I think, in the past few weeks and few months. And so you sort of bumble and reach sort of this situation.

But if you want to maybe come back and think about it a little bit more, the democratic transition in Tunisia, we put a significant effort in Tunisia at looking at the democratic path itself, perhaps at the expense of economic dignity that was also at the heart of the revolution. So the freedom component, the democratic path, I think, was tackled well.

But the dignity component was not tackled well. And when governments tried to tackle the socioeconomic challenges, they focused mostly on the social aspects, essentially hiring massively in the public sector, distributing social aid, instead of essentially reforming the economy and reforming the system. And that led us to debts and an incapacity today to invest in reviving the economy.

And so, to me, the combination of economic/social perhaps de-prioritization, combined with a sanitary situation that was very complicated. Arbia mentioned also a blockage in the political situation with a government that was unable to essentially operate led us to essentially, I believe, what happened on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July. In my humble opinion, what happened in the

25<sup>th</sup> of July had at least the merit of unlocking a situation that was extremely complicated and that would have led Tunisia, perhaps, to – you know, to bankruptcy, to social unrest because Tunisia, as you – as you mentioned, Tunisians have essentially lost faith in the institutions that govern them. Even though these institutions came out of democratic processes, these institutions were not able to function properly and address the concerns that the Tunisians felt were priorities for them.

Ms. Flacks

Thanks for that, Mohamed.

And, Shawna, Mohamed talked about economic and social equality and dignity as drivers for some of the problems we're seeing now. And I want to bring you into this conversation because the labor movement in Tunisia was one of the first actors to really actually come out in support of the president's moves, and I think the perception is it sort of helped drive popular support. Maybe they were also responding to some popular support for these moves. But I wonder if you can give us any insight into how the labor movement might be thinking about this. Is that support just frustration at some of the issues that have been previously mentioned – a lack of progress and a lack of functioning institutions – or do they see an opportunity here to actually make progress on some of their core priorities?

Shawna Bader-Blau

Well, thank you, Marti, and thank you to CSIS and Congressman Price for your leadership over many years in this field. And I want to really acknowledge and thank Mohamed and Arbia for their really, really helpful remarks bringing us into this conversation.

A reminder, the labor movement, the Labor Federation of Tunisia – the UGTT – is a big organization: 1 million members, very high level of union density in the country. And a reminder that the labor movement was a core supporter of the revolution – not a driver in 2010/2011, but a core supporter and backer – and since that time, from 2011 to the present, has worked extremely hard to be safeguarding the democratic processes along the way. And I think, Mohamed, your point that you made about dignity and missing the kind of dignity aspect, you know, this is what, of course, the labor movement's mantra and the mantra of the revolution also was: dignity, freedom, and social justice. Not just freedom, not just dignity, also social justice.

And I think leading up to, you know, this July, we have many years of a lot of unfulfilled, you know, promises of the hope of the revolution. Very important to the early days after the revolution, the labor movement in coalition, as Congressman Price mentioned, with larger civil society organizations in the country, you know, called for a new social contract, and in fact sat down and negotiated with business and government the outlines of a new social contract that would extend social security protections for all Tunisians, would generate employment policies that would both be pro-growth of the economy but also growth of jobs that are decent work with dignity, and very

importantly equality of economic opportunity and political inclusion for marginalized Tunisians in the – in the marginalized regions.

And regional development has really, you know, not succeeded over several years. Investment has not led to more equality of, you know, Tunisians. And the labor movement has been lifting up that issue consistently for 10 years. So more investment in rural Tunisian has been a mantra, and also on the social issues.

As Mohamed mentioned, you know, like, a lot of focus on social issues, maybe less on the economic. The Tunisian labor movement has tried to center both as key to dignity, freedom, and social justice. When there were attacks on women's rights that were coming out of some political parties and some tendencies, for example, in government and parliament, the Tunisian labor movement led a mass movement in coalition with women's organizations in the country to defend and stand up for the rights of women, for equality in the country. The labor movement has been outspoken over these many years about a vision of democracy that is maybe contested in Tunisia.

And this is a polarized country politically, but a vision of democracy that has dignity, freedom, and social justice at its core, but also very much is about inclusion – social inclusion of the rural areas and economic inclusion, inclusion of people with disabilities, migrant workers, women. A vision of democracy that is inclusive economically and politically for the most marginalized in the history of Tunisia. And, you know, the country's made so much progress on so many of these issues, but right now, as Arbia and Mohamed have set up, a lot of economic concerns as well as political concerns has really led to this crisis.

So, yes, the Tunisian labor movement, with its 1 million members who represent a huge portion of the Tunisian not only workforce but, you know, community, did in fact express support for the protests in July and as well as for the exceptional measures that were taken at the time. But this was not absolute and is not absolute support. The labor movement has been totally clear that this needs to be temporary, that there has to be a roadmap back to a normal democratic order.

They have, in fact, just the last couple of days been meeting in extraordinary executive session to develop a roadmap that they will present as a way forward that includes elements of inclusivity, of dialogue with political parties, major civil society actors in the country, economic forces. A national dialogue to come out of this crisis. And some of the reforms that Arbia was mentioning are definitely in – you know, part of that discussion. You know, the rebalancing of power in the political institutions in the country.

So I think that, yeah, the labor movement is in touch with a lot of people in Tunisia. And polls show that the Tunisian people are tired of corruption, are

tired of political polarization and stalemate. And as Mohamed said, maybe this action has shaken things up and provided an opportunity to make some corrections, course corrections, in the political sphere. But that – these – it cannot stay this way. It needs to be temporary.

There needs to be a return to normal constitutional order. And that it's incumbent on civil society, including the labor movement but also all its institutions, to hold the government accountable to that, and hold the president accountable to that. And so I think that's – the next phase coming will be the presentation of different elements of society presenting ideas for reform and pressing the state to take them up.

Ms. Flacks

Thanks, Shawna. That's a perfect segue to the kind of next conversation I wanted to have, which is looking forward where we need to go from here. How do we come out of this crisis? I think as you were just saying very clearly, and as the congressman put up front, this is – even though there's some level of popular support for this movement in the short term, this is not a sustainable situation. And we do need to get back to sort of regular order as quickly as possible.

So a question for all of you, just looking forward at what are some of the steps that you would like to see taken – both in the short term in terms of how we get out of this crisis, but I'm really interested in the how do we reinforce the institutions that failed in this case? How do we make some of these systems work better? The parliamentary – the parliamentary problems that we talked about early on, the lack of a constitutional court to adjudicate some of these challenges. What are the most important steps that you think that the government – you want to press the government to take, or that you think civil society can take to kind of help prevent – get out of this crisis, but really help prevent the next round of this crisis from happening, and really solidify some of those political institutions that are not functioning?

So let me – maybe I'll start with Arbia, but I would love to hear from all of you, if you have a view on this. Arbia, I think you might be muted.

Ms. Jebali

I'm sorry. (Laughs.)

Ms. Flacks

Go ahead. No worries.

Ms. Jebali

For the similar reason that I described now in the starting of my intervention, Tunisian people – the situation or the feeling of Tunisian people is fed up from all this toxic atmosphere and all these economical, social, educational, environmental contexts, and especially health context. So I think that Tunisian people feel that we is pushed to be launched in any different other path, and for that it was the reaction that you – that you see.

Ms. Flacks And are there – where do you think are one or two of the most important things that can come out of this crisis in terms of reinforcing institutions in Tunisia? What do you think we should be focused on both in – what should Tunisians be focused on, then us, the international community, as Friends of Tunisia? What messages should we be sending in terms of how to – how to reinforce those institutions?

Ms. Jebali About institutions in Tunisia, we lived several difficulties in our democratic path. Independent constitutional bodies are of great importance for building the desired democratic path and for the party controlling political life to not fall into tyrannical methods and arbitrary exploitation of power.

In 2014 constitution have then great importance through Chapter 124, where it defined them as independent body working to support democracy, and all state institutions should facilitate their work and make them in a vertical relationship with a balance of power due to its constitutional superiority. By virtue of this important role of these constitutional bodies, which are necessary to ensure the access of the democratic process, the constitution has – (audio break) – personality and administrative and financial independence from the legislative and executive authority. But the democratic process to strengthen the route of democratic practice in Tunisia have not been established, mainly. The Audio-Visual Communication Commission, it was disrupted due to the failure to reach a final consensus formula on a basic law regulating and paving the way of – for the election of its member.

The Human Rights Commission, it's also a constitutional body. The commission did not see the light because parliament did not decide on the nominations submitted to belong to this commission.

Another constitutional body, the Good Governance and Anti-Corruption Commission, it was greatly disrupted due to the failure of the plenary session held in the parliament.

The Commission for Sustainable Development and the Rights of Future Generations, unfortunately, its installation has not been completed and the basic law has only been approved pending the election of its members so that it can carry out of its work.

We see that this crisis is caused by the political division and the struggles of the political parties for the further coexistence of partisan interests that do not concern the people at all. The other reason is the political system in itself, as the parliamentary system has proven a complete failure in these 10 years for the – of political crisis and the movement of the path – the democratic path in Tunisia during 10 years from the revolution until now. Thank you.

Ms. Flacks Thanks, Arbia.

I want to ask the same question to Mohamed and to Shawna, which is, for – as the United States, as friends of Tunisia and those who want to help reinforce Tunisian democracy, what are the things that we can do to kind of help put them on the right track? What kind of support and assistance and messaging should we be sending to both the Tunisian government and political parties, but also to civil society in Tunisia? Let me start with Mohamed and then to Shawna.

Mr. Malouche

Marti, if I may, before I get into sort of the U.S. question I think it's important to highlight that this is, in my opinion, an opportunity for Tunisia. We're at a time where I think this action by the president has generated hope in the Tunisian people, as outlined by the polls – a hope that things will change in their daily life, that there will be less corruption, that there will be more dignity and more impact on them.

There are certain good things that are happening. You know, the vaccination campaigns have been going fairly well. The phosphate extraction in the south is resuming. The president is trying to make some symbolic things around prices decrease, et cetera. But I think the people will very, very quickly expect actions that can impact them. And you know, the presidency, I think, will need help to succeed – notably a prime minister who can handle the economic situation; notably a roadmap, a vision. And all of that would require significant support from civil society, from diaspora like ourselves, but also from our friends.

You know, as you said, you know, I think it starts with Tunisia. You know, we need to look into sort of what we need to do in terms of simplification of our legal frameworks, in terms of enablement of partnerships between the public and the private sectors, because if you don't change those things fundamentally you just continue substituting the actors and the system remains the same. That's what happened, you know, after 2011. We substituted the actors. The system remained the same. So the presidency will need all the help it can get, including, I think, the support of our friends around the world.

And to address your question directly, you know, I'm always surprised at folks that says, you know, cut the support to Tunisia because it will influence something. Frankly, cutting support to Tunisia will only hurt the Tunisian people, and it will do it at the worst time possible. On the contrary, I think it's very important to increase support to Tunisia, increase support to its civil society, to its watchdog organization. And it's much-needed economic support because Tunisia needs to take – you know, needs to adjust itself in its democratic path to make it sustainable, to make it real for the people.

The World Bank has pledged to support Tunisia. I believe the U.S. and the international community should continue supporting the country.

And let me say this. You know, I think it's sort of upsetting to many Tunisians and to many of our friends in the West that Tunisia, which is the sole success story in the Arab Spring – that its democratic path may be in jeopardy. But look, you cannot force things. You know, as we're witnessing in other parts of the world, you know, you cannot force things. Tunisia has succeeded over the years because it tried things on its own. The national dialogue is an example. Before that there were a number of reforms that were done throughout the history of the country that were successful.

So, yes, we need to be collectively vigilant. Civil society has to be aware. You know, people are educated in Tunisia. They will not go back to the old, you know, undemocratic path. But in my opinion, we should not jump to a model. We should not try to replicate the model. The country is capable. The Tunisian people are capable. They have tasted democracy. They have tasted freedom of expression. They just want to see a more efficient system who works for them and is able to – as I think Congressman Price said, you know, is able to sort of provide fruitful outcomes. You know, we shouldn't – we shouldn't go back, you know, to, certainly, a pre-2011 model, but we shouldn't go back to also a pre-July 25 model because that model diluted accountability. You know, nobody was responsible, and nobody was able to take the right decision and the courageous decision.

Ms. Flacks Thank you for that. Really important insights. Shawna, over to you.

Ms. Bader-Blau I think seconding a lot of what Mohamed just said. You know, there – Tunisia has been through challenges, even in the last 10 years. And has found ways at different and important moments to come together, institutions of civil society and government, to try to adjust and make changes. As Mohamed mentioned, and I think this is exactly what we understand from our work and friends in Tunisia as well, that, you know, no one wants to go back to 2010 and no one wants to go back to July 24th. (Laughs.) So there needs to be a path forward that people – and folks are committed to it.

So, you know, for civil society, demand a roadmap from the state. Demand, you know, an inclusive process of national dialogue. And Tunisia, uniquely among many countries, is well-positioned for that kind of dialogue to succeed, in large part because of the very advanced and sophisticated and strong civil society that is diverse, that has feminist organizations, that has organizations that care a lot about rural development, and high youth employment. The labor movement is developing right now a roadmap for a potential and inclusive process.

So, you know, it's important that – you know, I would say as – you know, for Congressman Price and those of us in the United States that are in solidarity with the people of Tunisia, Mohamed's point is well taken, that our role isn't presentation of a model for a people that have been forging their own models successfully and in a really fairly heroic way, particularly over the last decade. But we can stand in solidarity with people who are trying to

make these changes. And that can be in – take the form of further support for civil society. That can take the form of exchanges and visits that are really useful and important.

I think this question of political polarization is not unique to Tunisia. I mean, look at the United States. No one has a one key solution to the problem of political polarization. But we do know that dialogue is really crucial and so is building democracies that deliver. So ending corruption, attacking corrupt institutions, making sure that economic development is fairly distributed and that there's a coherent plan, helping develop a democracy that delivers, and encouraging national dialogue is really going to be key to supporting the vision Tunisians have for their future, which they are forging.

Ms. Flacks

Thanks, Shawna. Absolutely.

So in the interests of time, I'm going to combine a few of the questions we're getting from the audience around this question of what Tunisia – what impact Tunisia has on the rest of the world, and vice versa. And I think we got a few questions about how much Tunisia is being influenced by other countries. There's a perception, certainly, that they're growing closer to some of the Gulf States, some of the more autocratic states, and how much that may be influencing the situation. And you all are welcome to respond to that if you'd like, but I think you all just very clearly laid out how much this is an internally driven process and situation.

But I'm interested in the flipside of that, which is obviously we've all touted Tunisia as the one success story coming out of the Arab Spring. And Tunisia's influential in the region for many reasons, including its labor movement. And so I'm interested to hear from you, you know, what was happening in – and how what's happening in Tunisia matters for the rest of the Arab world, and for the global democracy and human rights agenda. Or, what's at risk here if we don't – if they don't get it right in Tunisia? But what's the opportunity if Tunisia continues to make progress? And how can we use what's happening in Tunisia to help further that global democracy and human rights agenda?

So tough question to answer but let me see if anyone wants to tackle that. Arabia, do you want to come in?

Ms. Jebali

Yeah. I totally agree with what Mohamed said, and Shawna. And thank you for this hopeful idea – ideas. This is an opportunity and challenge for Tunisia. I want just to explain a little bit the situation, the actual situation today, before the return of judicial year.

So it can be said that the recent decision taken by the president, Kais Saied, aimed to address the structural crisis afflicting the Tunisian political system during the next stage. From the current crisis, which remains open, to more than one month. During the next stage, the most probable are either the parliament will be dissolved technically and legally after excluding all those

who have judicial proceedings – and they are now today 50 suspects – until the judiciary decision on each ruling and punishing them or acquitting them after the return of the judicial year on September 15. Consequently, when parliament may be dissolved, the president announces the implementing premature legislative election. And it's likely that he will also conduct a people referendum on the political system in order to return to a presidential system – political system. The president also hinted more than once that the constitution should be revised. This is one scenario.

Another not-wished scenario is – the worst scenario, if we can say, is that these political developments is restrictions on liberties, the seizure of power, and return to oppression and muzzling, and consequently return to dictatorship more than that preceded it, and which we don't now wish for – wish for. And we should work on the first scenario to implement and to promote democracy in Tunisia.

And the impact of the international situation even in Afghanistan or Libya or North Korea or other countries, after holding the corrupt – and we see – and according to me, after holding the corrupt and those involved in sabotaging and looting the country accountable, we have no recourse but actual participatory dialogue and building a real democracy. The policy of impunity must be broken.

And the role of civil society, which has proven its worth and effectiveness in confronting and resolving previous crisis, must be appreciated, involved, and supported. Yes, Tunisia does need support, and we need support of the civil society to advocate, to press, to participate and implement participative dialogue and promote the democratic process.

Thank you.

Ms. Flacks

Thank you. Thank you so much, Arbia.

Let me see if Mohamed or Shawna has a last one-minute response they want to share with us.

Mr. Malouche

Maybe I'll start, Shawna, if you don't mind.

I think the – so when we talk about sort of, you know, following models, you know, I think every country has sort of its own situation. And frankly, I get sort of a little bit tense when people say, yeah, you know, it'll be a role model for other countries. Every country really has its own constraint, its own situation, its own history, its own capability, et cetera.

But I think in the case of Tunisia, what's at stake here is that we need to balance between being efficient and being at the same time participatory and really inclusive of all the opinions and all the perspectives. We have a unique opportunity, in my opinion, for – today for a government to be

appointed that could be undertaking difficult reforms, building upon the popularity of the president to pass difficult measures that can alleviate, once and for all, or begin to alleviate, once and for all, the system of privileges of corruption, of bureaucracy, of personal interest, and focus on the youth of Tunisia, on the entrepreneurs of Tunisia, on the SMEs of Tunisia, on the women of Tunisia, and simplifying the way we operate, because, at the end of the day, the Tunisian people, they're looking at a democratic system that enables them to have their freedom of expression but they're looking also for something that works for them and impacts their daily life. And in order to do that, I used to think that a gradual transformation of the institution was the way forward; in Tunisia we have that; we have سياسة المراحل, sort of a step-by-step, you know. But I think really it takes leadership, and we are at the moment where the president is very popular, and probably have the capacity to use that popularity to begin to change that system, because the system will not reform itself; gradually the system needs to be essentially, you know, reformed through leadership and important actions.

Ms. Flacks Thank you, Mohamed. Shawna, any final words?

Ms. Bader-Blau I know we're out of time so I just want to thank Congressman Price and thank Mohamed and Arbia for joining us today. It's great to hear from you. Thank you to Marti and CSIS, and I hope that you'll continue to shine a spotlight on Tunisia going forward.

Ms. Flacks Thanks so much.

Well, I want to thank all three panelists, Arbia, Mohamed, and Shawna, for a fascinating conversation, and of course Congressman Price for taking the time to be with us today.

I just want to say in conclusion of this discussion that this is a topic that I think is really important to continue to shed a light on. We know that – we've learned the hard way that democracy is not an on-off switch; it's a continuum and it's a continuous process. And we got a question in the Q&A about Tunisia's final destiny and I think we're all still as democracies searching for our final destiny, including here in the United States, and so it's a process. And I think there is a lot that we can do to keep – you know, to keep the spotlight on Tunisia's process and do what we can to support that evolution of democracy.

And I think the other thing that's really important that you all shined a really important light on is that democracy isn't just the political space; it's the social and economic space, as well, and how those three things have to work together and have to be successful in delivering for the people in order for democracy to really pay dividends and to be sustainable.

So thank you all so much for sharing those really important insights, and for our audience, thanks so much for being with us here today. Have a great day, everyone.

(END)