



PAPER NO. 8

SOCIAL PROTECTION

SOCIAL PROTECTION UNDER KAIS SAIED'S POLITICAL PROJECT:

CRUMBS AND CLUES IN SEARCH OF A VISION



Arab
Reform
Initiative



Arab Region Hub
for Social Protection

Cyrine Ghannouchi

About the Author

Cyrine Ghannouchi is a Tunis-based consultant in policy research and research program development with a focus on social justice and Economic and Social Rights. She holds an MA in Urban Planning from the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts and an MA in Public Policy and International Affairs from the American University of Beirut.

© 2023 Arab Reform Initiative. All Rights Reserved.



This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

Cover photo: Tunisians shout slogans and hold national flags during a protest against Tunisian President Kais Saied in Tunis, Tunisia - April 2022. © Yassine Gaidi - Anadolu Agency

November 2023

Introduction

Advocates of a social contract approach to social protection consider that social protection has been core to the legitimacy and sustainability of any political project, even if the latter does not offer a space for political participation.¹ Historically, the post-independence state-building phase in Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, or Algeria, generously validated this stance as the state positioned itself as the provider for, and protector of, societies, which helped freshly formed governing systems to quickly gain legitimacy for imposed regimes. The social policy of the state overall sustained adherence to a basic social contract (of subordination): the state provides, the people obey.² This does not mean that post-independence social policies in the region did not score positive achievements in their early years, but it is important today to reflect on those “success stories” by unpacking their political motivations, locally and globally.

Recent scholarship from the region started deconstructing those long-standing official narratives from the exploration of the perpetuation of colonial legacies by post-independence elites to the role of welfare in sustaining security belts around authoritarian regimes. However, the post-independence context is significantly different from the post-uprisings landscape. Since 2011, grievances across the region continued to have a strong socioeconomic character, resonating with provision and protection but also demanding political participation – to various extents – and translating the common need for a rupture with old social contracts. The erosion of the social role of the state under globalized neoliberalism and the shortcomings of development models are unanimously pinpointed as the main drivers of the uprisings, but there has been more to it since then. Today, it is also anchored in the dilemma between the state's capability to re-answer the 3Ps (provision, protection, political participation) amidst international turmoil and the very nature of domestic political projects in the Arab region.

The Tunisian experience became widely adopted as an illustrative case study in this regard. The current situation in Tunisia is often summarized as the abortion - or spoiling - of the premises of a new social contract and the political cooptation of social momentum. Tunisia is also often cited as evidence to back the necessity of methodological shifts in understanding post-uprising dynamics

by equally acknowledging the coexistence of political continuity and rupture.³ The persistence of unrest for over a decade is but the translation of tensions between political elites resisting or curbing prospects of change to preserve (or redistribute) privileges and social groups refusing to settle for an unachieved revolutionary process. However, in the meantime, much has happened, from police violence to political instrumentalization and cooptation of civil endeavors, slowly dismantling networks of collective action and deeply affecting the ability of individuals to keep the fervor alive. In the case of Tunisia, unmet needs, exhaustion, disillusionment, and political deadlock, coupled with a chaotic management of the Covid-19 pandemic, paved the way to another milestone in 2021, namely the declaration of the state of exception by President Kais Saied and the suspension and subsequent dissolution of the Parliament. Tackling social protection and vulnerability in Tunisia and understanding the process that led to July 25 are intrinsically linked, and so is exploring the limits of Saied's political project.

This paper is not interested in revisiting the diagnosis of the socioeconomic situation in Tunisia nor does it pretend to provide answers. However, it uses a social contract lens to shed light on blind spots in debates on social protection in Tunisia in its first section, particularly the “unspoken dynamics of unseen vulnerabilities”. In its second section, the paper investigates the articulation and ramifications of the social question in Kais Saied's new ongoing political project by reviewing his discursive body between the end of August 2022 and the end of May 2023. The choice of this period is framed by considering Articles 100 and 101 of the 2022 Constitution, respectively stipulating that the President of the Republic is the solemn policymaker and that his government is but the executive body of the President's policies. This period witnessed a myriad of events, including legislative elections and the implementation of the new Parliament whose activity is yet in its early days and is therefore excluded from the current analysis. While both sections seem distinct in their substance and approach, they together serve, particularly in the absence of a clear correlation, the quest for echoes of a grounded discussion of social protection in Kais Saied's agenda. The first section establishes a set of elements structural for the said discussion while the second section investigates traces of such a

1 Loewe, Markus, and Tina Zintl. 2021. “State Fragility, Social Contracts and the Role of Social Protection: Perspectives from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region.” *Social Sciences* 10 (447): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10120447>

2 See El-Haddad, Amirah. 2019. “Redefining the social contract in the wake of the Arab Spring: The experiences of Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.” *World Development* 127 (2020): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104774>

3 See, for example, Cavatorta, Francesco. 2015. “No Democratic Change ... and Yet No Authoritarian Continuity: The Inter-Paradigm Debate and North Africa After the Uprisings.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (1): 135–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2015.973200>

Hinnebusch, Raymond. 2015. “Change and Continuity after the Arab Uprising: The Consequences of State Formation in Arab North African States.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (1): 12–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2015.973182>

set in the President's discourse.

For this paper, social protection is understood in its socio-political sense and not in terms of technical systems of response confined to schemes of income-based categorization and the aid rationale. This definition recognizes social protection as the sum of social policies anchored in a rights-based approach and justice in accessing these rights. These policies range from food sovereignty to institutional and infrastructural efficiency, and from environmental hazards to education and housing. This definition rejects the association of social protection to "crisis" for crisis is but "the system working as intended",⁴ a dangerous discursive element that serves the illusion of inequality and suffering as "temporary" phenomena of "exceptional" times.

The Margins Have Margins Too: The Intimate Fabric of Vulnerability

In a qualitative field study conducted by the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) exploring "invisible" vulnerabilities,⁵ multiple takeaways offer interesting entry points to the discussion of social protection from a social contract outlook. For a start, the gap between the marginalized and state and non-state actors⁶ is gaining in depth, revealing significant fault lines and a persistent trust crisis. Groups interviewed⁷ say having opted to live in complete rupture with state and non-state actors and to distance themselves from the civic space, which also entails a deliberate abandonment of their civil rights. This widely shared choice is primarily shaped by despair, but also by their protracted invisibilization, or endured invisibility, exerted by political elites. In brief, endured invisibilization slowly becomes a deliberate invisibility described, in their own words, as an adaptive and protective mechanism to shield their "informal" modes of economic resistance and survival from repression or exploitation. It is also a way of expressing dissent,⁸

as these groups' withdrawal from the civic space does not mean the absence of collective action or organic spaces and forms of protest.⁹

These findings strongly resonate with the "intimate social contract" argument as a critical framework to explore the coexistence of multiple social contracts at various levels, particularly at politically marginalized scales.¹⁰ The margins are indeed a political space on its own, and the observed absence of trust, rejection of elite actors, and renunciation of civil rights at this level do not systematically mean the obsolescence of a social contract approach or the impossibility of its existence beyond its traditional definition. On the contrary, this rather invites a different apprehension of the formation and evolution of the "central" social contract by acknowledging and grasping the richness and complexity of intimate ones.

Intimate social contracts translate into group power dynamics and relationships, build on context-based, culturally specific customs, and incorporate organic modes of communitarian organization. Tribes, as socio-political structures that predate the "modern" state, come as a significantly illustrative example. In Tunisia, while the post-independence state worked on obliterating their existence, and even on their dismantlement, recent studies affirm their persistence and revived power and role.¹¹ While such structures bear collective solutions at the community level, they are not ideal as they equally tend to perpetuate inequalities within and between these communities. These inequalities are often driven by socio-cultural factors, particularly in terms of gender¹² and status.¹³ Non-codified, these intimate social contracts do evolve just as much as they allow the preservation of power dynamics and privileges as well as the reproduction of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction at the micro level.¹⁴ Yet the value of these contracts resides in their

4 Marcuse, Peter, and David Madden. 2016. *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*. Verso Books.

5 Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux. 2023. "Les Formes de Vulnérabilité et de Résistance 'invisibles' ou 'Invisibilisées.'" February 2023, <https://ftdes.net/rapports/precarite.fr.pdf>

6 The study mainly focuses on the following non-state actors: political parties, humanitarian organizations, and the media.

7 Such as rosemary collectors, plastic collectors, small fishermen, etc.

8 Excerpts of interviews included in the study echo Asef Bayat's concept of 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary.'

9 On the negotiation of spaces of resistance and survival, see also, Melliti, Imed, and Hichem Abdessmad, eds. 2022. *Vulnérables: Portraits Sociologiques*. Tunis: Dissonance.

10 Siddiqi, Ayesha, and Sophie Blackburn. 2022. "Scales of Disaster: Intimate Social Contracts on the Margins of the Postcolonial State." *Critique of Anthropology* 42 (3): 324–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X221120167>

11 See Ben Jaballah, Sofien (eds.). 2022.

12 One of the most illustrative gender-based inequalities is access to land. According to the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD, 2021), only 5% of women working in agriculture are landowners. Another example is the gender pay gap observed in already-precarious activities such as seasonal agricultural work. Moreover, it is quite common for women to be the sole providers for their families in urban suburbs and rural settings, while social customs give power to the man / the husband as the head of the household to have the exclusive management of the generated income.

13 Often acquired by inheritance and/or possession of assets and means of production. For example, land ownership in agricultural settings is a strong determinant in this regard.

14 Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The Continuum

5 *Social Protection under Kais Saied's Political Project: Crumbs and Clues in Search of a Vision*

contribution to the central social contract, on the condition that the latter respects their organic nature and honors constructive modes of collective socio-political organization and dynamics at the community level. Indeed, they offer niches to grasp the unseen complexity of the local and its mutations and reveal - by comparison - how and when communities move away from, or defy, the central social contract, why they do so, and what alternatives they adopt. In this sense, intimate social contracts help discern loopholes that call for urgent reform at the central level but also disclose entry points to curb in-group inequalities in return. This is to say that central and intimate social contracts are not antipodes; instead, they feed into each other, and their evolutions are intertwined.¹⁵

This said, the identification of deliberate invisibility as a mode of adaptation and resistance poses challenging questions to policymakers and “experts” alike, as it signals a growing difficulty to access these groups and to consider their dynamics when designing policies. Nonetheless, this also invites new questions of equal significance, particularly in terms of state-societies relationships. The use of the plural form in societies here aligns with the often-discarded argument on the imperative apprehension of a Society, in classical terms, as a non-homogenous mass, the nuances and diversity of which should serve as guides to the central power instead of their persistent dismissal or obliteration.¹⁶ Likewise, these relationships should not be perceived in terms of mere absence or presence of the state but also in terms of ‘how the state is present’ – repression, complicity, *laissez-faire*, etc. being all different forms of presence, and how and where it is absent – absence being also a deliberate choice of inaction or intentional withdrawal from some territories. This is at the heart of any process of defining or negotiating a social contract.

The study on Invisible Vulnerabilities highlighted an equally important set of factors resulting from the combination of scarcity of resources and withdrawal of the central power from investigated territories. The empirical methodology used to define investigated groups bypassed mainstream categories to shed light on modes of economic resistance per milieu,¹⁷ which put access to and conflict over resources at the forefront of the discussion. The study concludes that there is a territorial map that is almost entirely different from official ones, and that space is negotiated, organized, and managed by investigated groups along invisible or informal lines and frontiers where violence is

often involved, particularly in settings where environmental and climate-related problems heavily impact available resources.

While the territorial approach to vulnerability holds the potential of a more grounded understanding of vulnerability in the case of Tunisia, the study here discussed misses a defining factor of the country’s dynamics, that is migration under all its forms. Mobility, or movement, of vulnerable groups, constitutes an integral dimension of the evolution of intimate social contracts and their mutual negotiation. Considering vulnerability per milieu does offer a much-needed primary lens of analysis yet should not serve the apprehension of observed dynamics as static. While anchored and shaped around a given spatial frame, its resources, and modes of occupation, these dynamics are fluid and are equally, and constantly, redefined by flows of individual and collective experiences of movement. They sit at multiple intersections with different forms of migration and converse with national and transnational mobility pathways and experiences.¹⁸

The investigation of vulnerability within a defined spatial frame, or milieu, should hence incorporate methodological considerations that permit the tracking of intersecting vulnerabilities, ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ forms of vulnerability, as well as migration as a form of resistance, be it in search of new resources coupled with the perpetuation of the suffering or in quest of social mobility - increasingly replacing education as a way out. The pandemic was also a defining moment for the investigation of emerging forms of vulnerability and the questioning of the very definition of such a term as it is experienced differently beyond the economic spectrum, to encompass a sense of political marginalization as well. In Tunisia, the pandemic was followed by unprecedented waves of migration,¹⁹ highlighting a worrisome human capital loss as well and adding to the deterioration of public services, especially in the health sector. Highly qualified and socioeconomically privileged individuals have left, not in search of economic opportunities but rather for a better quality of life and a sense of freedom, recognition, and security.²⁰ All

Publishing Company

15 Siddiqi and Blackburn. Op. cit.

16 The argument also invites the consideration of transnational commonalities, shared experiences, and solidarity.

17 Immediate environment of residence, as defined by the study that explored the maritime milieu (coastal activities), urban settings, forests, rural settings, and the mining basin.

18 On the intersection of local vulnerability with the vulnerability of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, see: Tebini, Maram. 2023. «Le droit au logement comme lutte de places, d’espaces, et de marges : le cas des migrants subsahariens en Tunisie». Tunis: FTDES [Online] <https://ftdes.net/rapports/logement.pdf>. On mobility and collective migration pathways in search of social mobility, see the case of street vendors in Tunis, a field study by the FTDES summarized in collaboration with Inkyfada in a web documentary. Integral volume, edited by Sofien Jaballah, available in Arabic here: <https://ftdes.net/ar/rue-despagne/>

19 See, for example, Ben Jannet, Zouheir. 2022. “The Covid-19 pandemic and the evolution of migration intentions among Tunisian Households”. Tunis: FTDES [Online] https://ftdes.net/rapports/FTDES_Migration_Covid_En.pdf

20 Statistics in this regard remain scarce and disparate and the

6 **Social Protection under Kais Saied's Political Project:** *Crumbs and Clues in Search of a Vision*

combined, these forms of migration embody the very essence of the system in place and its unwillingness to counter the paradigm of “individual solutions for collective problems”.

To briefly conclude, a territorial, or spatial, apprehension of vulnerability could free response-design from the obsolete rigidity of technical, expert-led, income-based categorization, while incorporating the environmental question. Putting geography at the heart of the debate equally paves the way for justice-based approaches to vulnerability by ensuring the acknowledgment of distributive dynamics and systemic control of access to resources. Yet, to extend the potential of the territorial approach, the incorporation of mobility experiences is unavoidable. It calls for the consideration of time as a dimension core to understanding multilayered vulnerabilities and their evolution. The mainstream life-cycle framework in thinking social protection fails to grasp the intrinsic connectedness of experiencing precarity and the choice of mobility as part of a social group's “life” cycle that bypasses the individual and necessitates an intergenerational apprehension of the perpetuation, exacerbation, or ending of vulnerability.²¹ It is in sum a different outlook on vulnerability shifting its understanding from simplistic categories in a vacuum to cross-cutting socio-political experiences and agency within fluid spatiotemporal frames.

The next section builds on such elements of debate to explore the extent of their incorporation and ramifications in Saied's political project.

“No results found for this search”

Under the state of exception, Kais Saied holds the absolute power to rule by decree on all state matters.²² This is backed by an overall non-textual discourse made of recurring and strongly emphasized elements: Saied's political project is a duty before “God, History, and the People,” “to correct a deviation” and address the causes of injustices that seem to be all external to the state. Saied's speeches and public appearances continue to constitute a core element of his project, shaping and reshaping

phenomenon sparsely explored. Drivers are rather shared in intimate circles among families and friends, reaching and affecting an entire generation. Anyone residing in Tunisia can get a sense of it, ‘proper’ research approaches aside.

21 Part of this discussion is echoed in research on diasporas only with a growing focus on their economic role at the macro level (remittances and investments), shadowing their socioeconomic roles at smaller scales.

22 Following resort to Article 80 of the no-longer-effective 2014 Constitution but particularly decree 117/2021.

the public imagination, while addressing a myriad of messages to local and international political actors and institutions often indirectly.²³ The normative palette of Saied's discourse defines the people as one homogenous entity that is a victim of past political elites (excluded from this entity and opposed to it), “miserable” and in need of one leading figure to do justice to it. This leading figure knows the way, and it does not start with urgent socioeconomic reforms but rather with the “sanitization” or “cleansing” of the country and state apparatuses from “evil forces,” whose eradication would help the state function properly and answer its social obligations. These ‘evil forces’ remain unknown, unnamed and a featureless mass, which allows its usage, interpretation, and extension to whomever according to the context.²⁴ Othering the “enemy” is indeed a key feature of Saied's discourse, alongside the externalization of the drivers of the “crisis”.²⁵

Characterized by repetitive and salient oral traits and tones, Saied's speeches take a more pronounced symbolism when considering their settings, or the overall image constructed to convey a message. It is possible to broadly identify three settings, namely solo appearances (the rarest), official meetings and visits, and public settings involving a bain-de-foule and interaction with the most vulnerable. Yet, the question of where those most vulnerable, and the responses to address their vulnerabilities, might be located in Saied's political project persists. In what follows, this question guides the focus of a bird-eye review of Saied's discursive body in an attempt to discern where social protection, in its broadest sense, falls under his political project.

For such a purpose, a three-fold screening has been conducted to map Saied's discourse and thereby locate the social question broadly, and social protection in particular. The screening covers 1- decrees and decisions, 2- presidential activity, i.e., official meetings with the executive body²⁶ as well as field visits of a social character,²⁷ and 3- a selection of speeches. Presidential activity and speeches have been reviewed via the screening of the Presidency's official Twitter account. Decrees and ministerial

23 For an overview of Saied's discourses between July 2021 and June 2022, see *Ainsi Parlait Kais Saied*, a project by Inkyfada. See also Lakhali, Malek. 2022. “The ghost people and populism from above: The Kais Saied case”, the Arab Reform Initiative.

24 A recent example summarizing most of these discursive elements in a one-to-one meeting with the head of the government, 8 May 2023 <https://tinyurl.com/yc55nw9s>

25 On ‘externalization’ and its political and discursive usages, see Fawaz Traboulsi in an interview with *Sifr* magazine discussing the case of Lebanon <https://alsifr.org/fawwaz-traboulsi-lebanese-narratives>

26 Members of the government only. The screening does not review official meetings with international actors and non-Tunisian officials.

27 Public spaces, markets, popular neighborhoods, etc. in direct interaction with the public, excluding official ceremonies, commemorations, and visits to public institutions.

decisions are here mapped via the screening of the Tunisian Gazette. Both constitute archival material that this paper briefly explores for the period extending from 17 August 2022, the promulgation date of the 2022 Constitution,²⁸ to May 2023. The start date of this timeframe has been chosen based on Article 100 and Article 101 of the new Constitution respectively designating the President of the Republic as the sole policymaker and his designated government as the mere executor.

Decrees and ministerial decisions

A screening of decrees and ministerial decisions directly related to social protection was conducted covering nine successive months starting the entry into force of the 2022 Constitution - overall reiterating the social obligations²⁹ of the state as defined by the 2014 Constitution. A total of 109 issues of the Tunisian Gazette were reviewed, and only 18 texts directly related to social protection were identified as the following: 5 presidential decrees, including a loan to support social protection mechanisms,³⁰ 11 ministerial decisions issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), and 2 ministerial decisions issued by the Ministry of Family, Women, Children, and the Elderly (MoFWCE).³¹ Ad hoc, administrative, and hallow, are some of the adjectives that could describe the substance of these texts, ranging from small increases of wages and cash assistance allocations, exceptional and circumstantial measures, to minimal amendment and completion of previous laws and decisions far from living up to reform.

This screening revealed two elements of response: 1- the insignificant number of social measures translating a non-prioritization of the issue at stake, and 2- the mere continuity of past policies as carried out by these measures, but most of all, the absence of a vision and the incapacity of the state to live up to

its social role. Texts reviewed do not counterweight, at any level, the unsocial character of yet another milestone: the 2023 State Budget. Indeed, the 2023 State Budget Law is the highlight of this textual body translating the severity of the country's situation, the state's incapacity to live up to usher much-needed structural reforms, but most importantly, the continuity of past policies of fiscal injustice and uneven development.³² Expenditures allocated to employment and social affairs represent 8% of the state's budget, investment expenditures 8.7% of it, while 58% of the state's revenues to finance its 2023 budget come solely from consumption and income taxes.³³ Drafted by the executive body amidst "talks" with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the law bears no clues of a justice-based social vision nor prospects of change. Discrediting the President's social rhetoric, the law provoked a public debate much influenced by political divides and a dichotomic positioning (with or against Saied). The law did include a few budgetary lines supporting economic initiatives and small businesses for the most vulnerable, families with limited income, and unemployed graduates; however, when read holistically given the context, these allocations are a mere perpetuation of the "aid and burden-lifting" rationale.³⁴

More recent presidential declarations, particularly regarding negotiations with the IMF, suggest a different outlook and a "new turn", without translating a clear socioeconomic vision or alternative plans. On 4 May 2023, during a meeting with the Chief of Government (CoG), Saied reminded his executive team of the exclusivity of his policymaking prerogatives stating that "no party whatsoever in Tunisia can act in discordance with the policy set by the President of the Republic".³⁵ The statement comes after Saied's decision to dismiss the Minister of Industry and Energy, allegedly after she gave an interview affirming the progress of a new subsidy system in line with the IMF's recommendations. For context, soon after the declaration of the state of exception, Saied ordered a full audit of the country's loans and debts, referring to mismanagement and corruption in this regard, but never mentioned any prospective endeavors of debt cancelation for months.³⁶ On several occasions, Saied has expressed his

28 Titled as the Constitution of July 25th. The text, drafted by the President, was subject to a referendum in July 2022 and entered into force a month later. Full text <https://tinyurl.com/y3ahx2sv>

29 Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia of the 25th of July 2022. Articles 12, 16, 18, 19, 22, 43, 44, 46, 47, 48, and 51 to 54.

30 A bilateral agreement with Japan.

31 To put the volume of texts related to social protection under a comparative light, ie. for perspective, one should note that the number of texts per issue of the Gazette vary from one text to 60 texts and more. Most of the texts, since July 2021, are all about dismissals and appointments of new state officers. The author did not count all texts of the screened issues, yet roughly, based on an estimated average of 10 texts per issue, 109 issues screened equal to 1090 texts in total, hence the insignificant number of texts related to social protection.

32 For a breakdown of the 2023 State Budget Law, see *Budget 2023: What if Tunisia had only 100 Dinars in the State Treasury?*

33 Ibid.

34 On the colonial roots of the burden-lifting rationale, containment practices, and their judicial ramifications in Tunisia today, see Ben Achour, Sana. 2021. *La répression pénale de la pauvreté*.

35 Full video <https://tinyurl.com/4f3m2rdm>

36 Not until his recent meetings with Italy's Prime Minister, a discussion within a very sensitive and specific context and regional political maneuvers related to undocumented migration in the Mediterranean. See the Presidency's tweet posted on 6 June 2023 <https://tinyurl.com/mts7avsb>. On experiences of unilateral debt cancelation and the historicity of foreign debt in the MENA region, including Tunisia, see Eric Toussaint's interview with Sifr magazine <https://alsifr.org/eric-toussaint>

rejection of any “foreign dictations”, including from the IMF, and his will to address the situation internally, hence opposing and discrediting his government’s technical negotiations with the Fund. Earlier in June, Saied openly addressed the subsidy question suggesting the imposition of taxes on those unjustly benefiting from such social measures³⁷ in what seems to be the premises of a new proposal and a “fairer” response to the IMF.

Speeches and presidential activity

Between September 2022 and May 2023, Saied met with members of the government 136 times.³⁸ If we exclude the meetings with the CoG given the very nature of her position and the infinite number of topics she has been invited to “discuss”,³⁹ official meetings with the MoSA represent only 6% of all ministerial meetings per sector compared to meetings with the Ministry of Interior (MoI), the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, respectively representing 34%, 26% and 12% of ministerial meetings per sector. Meetings with ministries, the mission of which is directly linked to the social question,⁴⁰ represent 24% of the total sum, noting that Saied did not invite the MoFWCE on any occasion over the investigated period.

The MoSA is the main body in charge of social protection in Tunisia. Yet, the limited number of meetings with the MoSA does not mean the absence of the social question from Saied’s “interactions” with his executive team, especially when receiving the CoG. Overall, the question is present via two sets of elements, namely 1- a discursive field revolving predominantly around slogans on “the social role of the state,” “the resolution of the socioeconomic situation,” and “social justice”, and 2- a keen emphasis on components of Saied’s political project such as the Penal Reconciliation program,⁴¹ the “war” against

corruption and monopoly, and the controversial Communitarian Enterprises program.⁴² Nevertheless, a closer look at available recordings of meetings with the MoSA brings more perspective to the discussion beyond frequency and with consideration of the substance of those meetings, often seized as a unilateral opportunity for Saied to send messages to everyone but his direct interlocutor. For example, in a one-to-one meeting held on 3 March 2023 with the MoSA,⁴³ Saied starts by describing the socioeconomic question as “fundamental” to then directly link it to accountability and his promise to “the people” to restore justice. Out of a seven-minute monologue, six minutes were dedicated to engaging with a recent point of political tension with the General Labor Union (UGTT),⁴⁴ with archival materials in hand to “remind” the Union’s current leadership of the ‘exclusively social’ mission of the institution. Since the beginning of 2023, and over five months, this constitutes the only time Saied received the MoSA alone, the second occasion being in the presence of the CoG and the MoI regarding delays as per the attribution of social housing units.

When analyzed in view of the MoSA’s activity, as translated by the number and substance of decrees and ministerial decisions reviewed in the previous section, as well as by comparison to the number of meetings with other sectors, such a rarity confirms a tendency: what continues to be of high importance and priority for the President, months after he succeeded in imposing a new Constitution, are security, the judiciary, and foreign affairs,⁴⁵ all

to ensure the implementation of the project, clearly not showing any progress months after its formation, a latency to which Saied recently responded by dismissing the head of the committee in March 2023.

42 The program, subject to decree 15/2022, ushered wide debates and critiques, especially that a law on Social and Solidary Economy (SSE) was ratified and signed by Saied himself in 2020 and remains pending executive measures for its implementation. Observers consider that Saied’s Communitarian Enterprises give the state great margins of control and intervention while the SSE governance model is inherently independent from central power. The 15/2022 decree is for some observers the single socioeconomic measure taken by Saied so far despite its flaws and obsolescence.

43 Full video <https://tinyurl.com/5dzue79m>

44 The UGTT organized a series of demonstrations across the country in preparation for a central rally to denounce the overall situation of liberties and human rights under Saied’s rule, and invited the General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation who joined in solidarity. The Presidency promptly replied by asking the invitee to leave Tunisian territories considering her statements as foreign interference with national matters. This further ignited tension between the President and the UGTT <https://tinyurl.com/2p8jp3sc>

45 Respectively: 27, 21, and 10 meetings over the investigated period. For more perspective, meetings with other Tunisian officials and institutions screened over the same period go as the following: President of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary [6], President of the Parliament

37 TAP Agency News, June 1st 2023 <https://tinyurl.com/2tnup7r5>

38 Excluding Ministerial and Security Councils and noting that some meetings gather two or more ministries here counted separately i.e., per representation of a given ministry throughout all meetings. Review has been conducted regardless of cases of dismissal and new appointments as well as partial reshuffles. However, some results might be affected by vacancy such as the case of the Ministry of Employment, only insignificantly so.

39 57 meetings with the CoG over the explored timeframe of nine months.

40 Ministers of Education [4], Higher Education [2], Infrastructure and Housing [1], Environment [1], Transport [0], Health [3], Employment [1], Cultural Affairs [3], Women Family Children and the Elderly [0]

41 In brief, this program is promoted by Saied as the solution to implement distributive justice as he sees it: the most corrupt will invest in the least developed regions with a decennial responsibility to correct their past mistakes and start anew. A committee has been formed by Saied

9 *Social Protection under Kais Saied's Political Project: Crumbs and Clues in Search of a Vision*

of which serve the implementation of his project.

Saied also sustained a regular frequency of field visits of a social character that amounted to 16 occasions throughout the investigated timeframe, mostly in the capital city and its surroundings, amidst cheering crowds expressing support or sharing socioeconomic grievances during a brief interaction with the President. These visits have two roles: reiterating the legitimacy and popularity of Saied beyond, and regardless of, voter participation rates throughout his project's milestones,⁴⁶ and sustaining the image of "the father of the destitute", altruistic and close to his people, negating himself for them, and sharing their struggles and sacrifices. During a field visit to a local market in a popular neighborhood in Tunis last February, a man addressed the President saying, "we are being patient because you told us to show patience, we are still waiting," and Saied answered, "I know what it means to have children and be exhausted".⁴⁷ Such an interaction echoes the insights shared by the field researchers who participated in the study on Invisible Vulnerabilities discussed above: the "people" did adhere to a *carte blanche* moment with Saied, only on conditions of delivery, and time is running.⁴⁸ One wonders if Saied fully grasps the socio-political mutations undergoing in the meantime, and more importantly, the dismantlement of safety nets and social cohesion as observed by sociologists since the pandemic.

Since the 2019 elections and early months of the pandemic, and over three years, Tunisia continues to witness the perpetuation of the same vicious dynamic that marked the post-uprising era: political agendas superseding and shadowing the urgency of the country's socioeconomic situation, and state capture in servitude of those agendas on the expenses of the social. The same rationale continues to be fed to "the people": reaching political stability, as defined by the ruling elite, comes before

since the legislative elections [3], Central Bank [2], the Trade Union UTICA [2], the Labor Union UGTT [2], CSOs [2] - the Tunisian Federation for Human Rights and the Tunisian Organization for the Defense of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

46 Respectively the national e-consultation (January to March 2022), the referendum on the new Constitution (July 2022), and the legislative elections (December 2022 and January 2023, two rounds) after amendment of the electoral law. All these milestones witnessed unprecedentedly low turnouts. The e-consultation organized throughout 2022's first quarter in preparation of the constitutional referendum could be subject to analysis to explore how the formulation of the suggested questions and response options implied a preset socio-political vision of Saied's Tunisia. While discarded by commentators and scholars for being "imposed" and "non-representative," as only 4.4% of Tunisians participated in the consultation (see *E-Istichara, la réalité derrière les chiffres*), it still offers interesting insights to see how collected results echo Saied's discourse and feed into his narrative. The final report, questions and results included, is available here <https://www.e-istichara.tn/home>

47 Full video <https://tinyurl.com/ybzsst6z>

48 Brief interview with members of the research team. Tunis, April 2023.

tackling the socioeconomic. Within the limits of this paper, the social question seems to be somewhat present in Saied's agenda, yet voided of its meaning, eroded by the gap between discourse and practice, and the absence of a vision, all coupled with state incapability. The impermeability of Saied's rule and the marginalization of civil and social actors add bricks to such a wall. The social, as a rhetoric, remains however of great importance to Saied as a political leverage rooted in his project's discursive seeds of suffering alleviation, rupture with previous elites, self-determination, sovereignty, and justice - a project that largely speaks to genuine resentment shared by Tunisians. Those "honest," "patriotic", and dispossessed constitute Saied's security belt, until further notice.

Overall, endeavors summarized in this paper in the pursuit of clues to map where social protection stands in the ongoing political project in Tunisia seem to be vain, and social protection reforms to be a premature, fictional discussion under current circumstances; and so is the exploration of how international and local initiatives in this regard are echoed in Saied's Tunisia. It is however necessary to mention that the principle of Universal Social Protection, an international agenda occupying much of global public policymaking spheres, especially since the pandemic, is echoed in the social chapter of the National Dialogue Initiative led by the Labor Union alongside three partner organizations.⁴⁹ According to a representative of one of the member organizations, the draft of the Initiative sets political grounds for all chapters by suggesting the discussion of a "Republican Contract." The representative briefly elaborated on this point saying that "there is no social contract in Tunisia today and it is the only way forward and we need to resume this particular process of negotiation. But since 'social contract' has been often associated with the social question almost exclusively in previous years, its understanding is still archaic in Tunisia, at least in public spheres of debate. Resort to the idea of a 'Republican' contract or pact is simply a way to encompass the political, overcome the dissociation of the social from the political, and translate a holistic vision that speaks to all." Unpacking the Initiative's adoption and adaptation of the principle of Universal Social Protection to the Tunisian context from the Union's perspective and under its "Republican Contract" outlook does sound like an interesting research prospect, but given domestic political tensions blocking the way to any dialogue, the Initiative seems to have no tomorrow beyond paper.

49 Brief interview with an executive representative of the FTDES, one of the four members of the Initiative. Tunis, May 2023.

Conclusion

A dysfunctional social protection policy has a long-term significant toll on social cohesion. However, there is more gravity in the illusion created, discursively or otherwise, by a fake sense of security constraining collective action. In such cases, the limits of the system in place are justified not by the structural deficiency of that very system but by a transfer of responsibility to citizens, global hazards, or an unknown external wrongdoer. Sustaining such an illusion is crucial to ruling elites to withdraw even further from accountability or to conceal the state's structural incapacity to provide public/social services and prevent institutional decay. More importantly, it paralyzes collective action calling for a motion forward against stagnation. In the case of Tunisia, the "margins" are expanding, vulnerability is taking new forms, while the current political project revolves around unmet promises of provision and protection and a heavily controlled and fake sense of political participation. But the (re)negotiation of a social contract in Tunisia can no longer discard the margins nor the state's obligation to live up to all the 3Ps with no compromises. Failure to do so equals the slow erosion of the state's legitimacy.

The political project of Saied is not interested in establishing a new social contract or in restoring the socio-political process leading to such an objective. It is a top-down, non-participatory, solitary, tabula rasa project, where genuine rupture with previous state practice (especially of security response to all matters) and socioeconomic policies are yet to be demonstrated. Despite such an overtness, this paper tried to genuinely search for clues of a comprehensive social vision beyond the President's portfolio of penal reconciliation and communitarian enterprises as well as the impermeability of his project to social actors, to conclude (or verify) that there are none. The relationship between the current political leadership and Society is at best a moment of truce for the political rupture that Saied embodied at a crucial moment. Social justice, in the meantime, remains a slogan.

This said, there are two takeaways that this paper wishes to convey. First, and despite the growing marginalization of civil and social actors and their exclusion from decision-making processes under Saied's era, the main duty of CSOs today is to sustain spaces of dialogue at the grassroots level within the remaining margins of action. This prepares for what is next, in all its possible scenarios, including through field research to keep track of social mutations and ensure contextually rooted and evidence-based knowledge production – not only for informed policies, whenever possible, but also to properly negotiate civil agency locally and internationally. These are also times for local CSOs to review their toolboxes and rethink their relationship with the margins as well as with international actors and donors. Investing in spaces of tension is equally important with a focus on dynamics within and between emerging grassroots movements and global policymaking spheres. The shrinking of the civic space today is not an exclusively Tunisian phenomenon, it is rather the symptom of a deeper and commonly shared

observation across the region and beyond, a clearly contagious one. Much of the answer to civil society's current struggle lays there, and anticipation is key.

Second, and as per the social question as the backbone of such endeavors, what should guide future action is also a much-needed shift in the social protection paradigm toward a justice-based approach rejecting the "aid in times of crisis" mainstream discourse and ensuring the immunization of social protection policies from political instability and instrumentalization. A justice-based approach takes the right-based one a step farther and allows the consideration of the root causes of vulnerability for their progressive dismantlement beyond mere alleviation and the "resilience to shocks" rationale. It also offers a space to incorporate intimate modes of socio-political organization of the collective and to equally curb in-group inequalities ingrained in the cultural. Neglecting or rendering vulnerable groups and their dynamics invisible will always pose a threat to any political process. Depoliticizing answers to vulnerability equally signifies the vulnerability or frailty of the political. So does the political instrumentalization of collective suffering, be it by ruling elites or by civil actors, no matter how well-intended their agendas are.

About Arab Region Hub for Social Protection

We are a space in and through which professionals dedicated to exploring, understanding and advocating for better social protection in the Arab region exchange ideas and explore and initiate collaborative action. We envision an Arab region in which all people, regardless of their identities, are guaranteed social protections that secure their access to the essential goods and services needed to ensure their well-being and decent standards of living, which in turn gives them the opportunity to prosper and contribute as active members of society. We aim to facilitate the development of equitable and sustainable social protection systems in the region by: executing, encouraging and facilitating the production, analysis, collation, and dissemination of interdisciplinary knowledge about the topic; facilitating dialogue within professional spheres and awareness raising among the wider public; and enhancing collective action that amplifies advocacy efforts with the different stakeholders and decisionmakers.

Social Protection Program

The Arab Reform Initiative's Social Protection Program, which gave birth to the Arab Region Hub for Social Protection, aims to place social policy and its impact on the socio-economic rights of citizens and residents in Arab countries center stage in the research and advocacy efforts seeking to achieve social justice and social equality. By mobilizing and coordinating a community of practice and knowledge on social protection, the program aims to create a safe space for regular and systematic dialogue between the different stakeholders, in order to help addressing the problem of fragmented, non-inclusive, ineffective, and unsustainable social protection systems in the region. While doing so, the program adopts different perspectives – from addressing the necessary policy, programmatic, institutional, financial, legal and legislative reforms; to the political economy involved in the feasibility of these reforms; passing by social activism around welfare policies.



contact@arab-reform.net
Paris - Beirut - Tunis

The Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.