

118TH CONGRESS
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S. RES. 260

Recognizing Tunisia's leadership in the Arab Spring and expressing support for upholding its democratic principles and norms.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

JUNE 21, 2023

Mr. DURBIN (for himself, Mr. MURPHY, Mr. WELCH, and Mr. COONS) submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations

RESOLUTION

Recognizing Tunisia's leadership in the Arab Spring and expressing support for upholding its democratic principles and norms.

Whereas Tunisia gained its independence from France on March 20, 1956, with Habib Bourguiba serving as Prime Minister, before becoming Tunisia's first President in 1957;

Whereas President Bourguiba led Tunisia through independence and the ensuing 30 years, a period that included vast social reforms and restrictions on civil society and democratic participation;

Whereas, in 1987, Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali deposed President Bourguiba and named himself Presi-

dent of Tunisia, citing Bourguiba's incompetence and failing health to justify his undemocratic actions;

Whereas President Ben Ali was subsequently elected in 1989 and 1994 without genuine opposition, and was re-elected in 1999, 2004, and 2009 by implausibly high vote margins in election processes that were widely deemed as neither free nor fair;

Whereas President Ben Ali's rule was marred by gross human rights violations and a lack of democratic freedoms;

Whereas, the 2003 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, released by the Department of State on February 25, 2004, stated, referring to Tunisia—

(1) "Elections are regularly characterized by notable irregularities, including voter intimidation, and there is no secret ballot.";

(2) "Security forces physically abused, intimidated, and harassed citizens who voiced public criticism of the Government.";

(3) "The Government continued to impose significant restrictions on freedom of speech and the press.";

and

(4) "The Government remained intolerant of public criticism and used physical abuse, criminal investigations, the court system, arbitrary arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls (including denial of passports) to discourage criticism by human rights and opposition activists.";

Whereas, on December 17, 2010, 26-year-old fruit and vegetable street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi lit himself on fire in desperate protest in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, an act that

was largely seen as the beginning of the Arab Spring movement that spread throughout the region;

Whereas ensuing popular protests in Tunisia in response to corruption, repression, and economic failure—

(1) forced the resignation of President Ben Ali from the office of president;

(2) ended his 23-year rule; and

(3) further inspired similar pent up democratic demands throughout the Arab world;

Whereas Tunisia emerged from the Arab Spring as one of the most hopeful and promising reformed democracies in the region, including with an interim government and a Constituent Assembly responsible for drafting a new constitution and fostering political compromise for a future democratic government;

Whereas, in February 2011, Senator John McCain urged United States support for Tunisia’s democratic transition, noting “The revolution in Tunisia has been very successful and it has become a model for the region.”;

Whereas, in March 2011, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon pledged full support for Tunisia’s transition to democracy, hailing the country’s revolution as the spark that lit “the profound and dramatic changes” sweeping the Arab world;

Whereas, on January 26, 2014, the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia adopted a new constitution demonstrating consensus for building a democracy founded on freedom and equality;

Whereas the new constitution of Tunisia includes Articles that—

(1) give equal rights to men and women;

(2) protection freedoms of assembly, peaceful demonstration, expression, and publication; and

(3) outline an electoral system and representation for the Tunisian people with checks and balances;

Whereas, in November 2014, Tunisia held its first genuinely free and fair presidential election since its independence in 1956, with 27 candidates freely competing for the office of president;

Whereas longtime politician Beji Caid Essebsi won the election in a runoff with 55 percent of the vote, becoming Tunisia's first legitimately elected president since independence;

Whereas President Essebsi faced many difficult challenges, including economic turmoil, terrorist attacks, and public expectations for change;

Whereas public disillusionment with the country's political elites increased amid continued corruption and devastating acts of terrorism that severely hurt the tourism industry and larger economy;

Whereas political outsider and constitutional law professor Kais Saied won the presidential election held on October 13, 2019, and was sworn into office 10 days later in a peaceful transfer of power;

Whereas, by 2021, protests in response to worsening economic conditions, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, occurred across cities in Tunisia, to which the police responded violently;

Whereas, in July 2021, President Saied capitalized on unrest to unilaterally seize power by—

(1) dismissing Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi;

(2) suspending Parliament for 30 days; and

(3) assuming full executive authority without first consulting the government;

Whereas, in late 2021, President Saied indefinitely suspended Parliament and transferred all legislative powers to himself;

Whereas, in early 2022, President Saied continued to undermine Tunisia’s democratic institutions, including by taking control of the Independent High Authority for Elections and dissolving the High Judicial Council;

Whereas, in July 2022, President Saied unilaterally put to a referendum a new draft constitution, which—

- (1) consolidated power to the presidency;
- (2) limited parliamentary authority; and
- (3) diminished judicial independence;

Whereas the new draft constitution was approved despite remarkably low voter turnout and heavy domestic and international criticism surrounding the lack of genuine debate throughout the drafting process;

Whereas, between 2021 to 2023, Tunisia experienced—

- (1) a dramatic drop in voter participation and public confidence in the political process; and
- (2) an escalation in politically motivated arrests of political opponents, judges, lawyers, journalists, and business leaders; and

Whereas President Saied’s actions have dramatically undermined and threatened Tunisia’s nascent democratic institutions: Now, therefore, be it

1 *Resolved*, That the Senate—

- 2 (1) recognizes Tunisia as the symbolic birth-
- 3 place of the historic Arab Spring movement and the

1 country's notable democratic reforms that emerged
2 during the Arab Spring period;

3 (2) commends the Tunisian people for their
4 courage and democratic achievements made in the
5 immediate years following the Arab Spring;

6 (3) expresses deep concern for more recent re-
7 versals of such democratic gains, including—

8 (A) the erosion of judicial independence;

9 (B) political repression and arrests; and

10 (C) the undemocratic consolidation of
11 power;

12 (4) urges the Government of Tunisia—

13 (A) to release all political prisoners; and

14 (B) to respect the rights of the people to
15 free exercise of peaceful assembly, expression,
16 and the press; and

17 (5) calls on the Government of Tunisia to sup-
18 port a transparent and open 2024 presidential elec-
19 tion process.

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