



Tunisia's new local governance project and the risk to jeopardise political stability and democratisation

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Abstract: †The new local architecture developed unilaterally by President Said presents a model of governance bound to pose serious challenges to democracy-building efforts in a young democracy like Tunisia. Above all, it would continue to widen the gap between citizens - particularly young people increasingly disengaged from political life and those in power.

Tunisians headed to the polls to elect members of local councils on 24 December 2023 and 4 February 2024, in a [two-round voting system](#). These elections are leading to the establishment of local, regional, and district councils, some of whose members, elected by their peers, will form the second chamber of parliament, the National Council of Regions and Districts, a novelty in the Tunisian political and parliamentary system.

The turnout was around 12 percent, reflecting a striking lack of interest among citizens in the elections and the political process as a whole, particularly among young people, which was the largest group absent from these elections. This

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phenomenon was also observed in the candidate category. Only [22 percent of candidates](#) were under 35 years old.

The growing disinterest of young people in political participation has become a [trend](#) worth observing. Young people are disengaging from conventional, formal, and structured political institutions and mechanisms, such as traditional political parties and voting, preferring to express themselves and get involved in other ways.

The lack of representativeness in elected councils will not be the only source of concern for future local political dynamics. The legal and political contours of this new project for local governance, known as the '[bottom-up structure](#)' are likely to increase the disenchantment and disillusionment of the population that triggered the first Arab revolution in 2011. They could also compromise the process of building and consolidating democracy.

The 2022 Constitution, whose drafting process was marked by the [exclusion](#) of the main political and civic actors, [stipulates](#) that elected members of all elected bodies, including local councils (at local, regional, and district levels) other than the President of the Republic, are subject to the revocation provision. The mechanism of revocation has thus been introduced for the very first time into the Tunisian legal and political register.

This legal mechanism allows voters to remove an elected representative from office. This is a form of oversight mechanism for elected representatives that would enable citizens to exercise horizontal accountability and not just vertical accountability during elections but throughout their term of office. Notably, the removal of elected representatives is the expression of power to sanction those in power by removing them from office before the normal end of their term.

It must be highlighted that the renewal of the instruments of semi-direct democracy and the development of the tools of participatory democracy are at the origin of the adoption of this mechanism in several countries of the world and, in particular, in the United States. The revocation measure aims to remedy the '[democratic malaise](#), the feeling of powerlessness among citizens in the conduct of public affairs', and the idea that politicians are more interested in satisfying their own interests or those of particular interest groups than in the general interest, which fuels popular distrust of those in power.

Although the mechanism of revocation is a democratic instrument *par excellence*, the legal provisions and the political conditions under which this mechanism is introduced could lead to a counterproductive outcome, especially in a political context as fragile as that of Tunisia.

In accordance with the new law governing local elections, all candidates must present an electoral programme in which they undertake to take action in their constituency during their term of office. It is this electoral programme that candidates must present to their constituents in order to obtain the 50 signatures required for their candidacy to be accepted by the electoral commission.

However, no legal text specified the prerogatives of local councils to date.

Candidates had to run their election campaigns and draft their manifestos, setting out their projects and plans for the duration of their term of office, without having any details on the outlines and limits of their powers. The local elections took place in a climate of [uncertainty](#) and confusion for voters and candidates alike.

Over the past decade, several public opinion research and surveys in Tunisia, such as those conducted by [NDI](#) and [IRI](#), have shown that the erosion of public confidence in the political elite, one of the main expressions of which is the fall in voter turnout, is directly linked to the inability of elected representatives to keep their electoral promises. During their campaigns for the local elections, the candidates presented various projects ranging from local development and the environment to agriculture and cultural development.

A political reading of the government's decision to hold local elections without defining their prerogatives and without any official explanation of the reasons for this decision points to a strategy of weakening elected institutions and marginalising them in favour of the only strong, stable institution that is a source of confidence, namely the Presidency of the Republic.

The latest Arab Barometer survey on Tunisia [shows](#) that 'Tunisians have far greater trust in President Kais Saied than they do in the government or parliament'. This trend is expected to remain unchanged ahead of the presidential elections due to be held later this year.

In addition, local councils will have no financial or administrative autonomy and their budgets will be set by the executive power. This is in direct contrast to the 2018 [Decentralization Law](#), which President Saied replaced by the [new local governance](#) project in 2023. Under the 2018 law, local councils are not dependent on the executive power and are free to develop and manage their own budgets according to the principle of free administration. It seems clear that the end of all forms of local autonomy and the push towards strong centralization are at the heart of the new local governance project.

As a result, it will be very difficult for elected representatives to keep their electoral promises, as they will not be able to decide on the most important local public policy tool at their disposal: the budget. Every elected member at local, regional, and district level risks being voted out of office by their constituents through the revocation provision, leading to by-elections. This could erode the already fragile trust between citizens and political institutions, and create electoral fatigue with repeated by-elections and the emergence of new members.

More importantly, this could mark another hit in the very fragile democratic process of Tunisia where democratic institutions like local elected bodies and democratic processes such as elections are already losing their value and interest as they fail to deliver and to enable better, equitable and just socio-economic living conditions for Tunisians.