



## The Future of Local Governance and Development in Tunisia

### Policy Issue

The future of Tunisia's local government reforms and decentralization efforts hang in the balance as President Kais Saied presented a new constitution to the country for the July 25 referendum, which passed with more than 90 percent of voters supporting the measure. It is unclear to what extent the new laws will strengthen presidential power and how much space there will be for citizens to participate in politics.

### The Context

GLD recently held a Policy Roundtable that brought together experts to discuss questions of local governance and development. Participants included **Sarah Yerkes** of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; **Mohamed Dhia Hammami** at Syracuse University; **Intissar Kherigi** of Sciences Po; and **Lana Salman** at Harvard Kennedy School. **Marwa Shalaby** of the University of Wisconsin-Madison chaired the panel.

It has been one year since Saied grabbed power in Tunisia and froze Parliament, before dissolving it completely. He has [dismantled the constitution](#), the high judicial council and the anti-corruption commission, while relying on the police and military to silence opponents. "Over the past ten months, President Saied has effectively and efficiently unwound nearly ten years of democratic progress," said Yerkes. The country is in a critical period as advisors draft a new constitution. The panelists highlighted three insights for understanding Tunisia's future.

### 1. The Paradox of Local Governance

President Saied has long been an advocate for bringing decision-making closer to the people. During his 2019 presidential campaign, he advocated [decentralizing power to local councils](#), while getting rid of political parties. Councils would elect representatives to advise the president. On the other hand, he has strengthened the presidency to levels far beyond the powers granted to him in the 2014 constitution. He has not invested in marginalized areas, and has left "no room for participatory democracy," said Yerkes.

While the dominant narrative is that Saied holds support from disgruntled youth fed up with corruption and a stagnant economy, Dhia Hammami argues that his supporters are unwilling to act on his behalf: "He is relying on a support base that is shrinking," Hammami said. The tension between local participation and a strong executive will shape Tunisia's political development in ways that will affect decentralization, distribution of public resources, and representation.

### 2. Spaces for rearranging power relations

While there has been a complete freezing of the decentralization process, the municipalities are the "last elected councils left standing," said Kherigi. However, this stalemate is also an intriguing source of political struggle. The central government is trying to instill its control over municipal decision-making by moving authority to the Ministry of Interior, while municipalities attempt to remain independent with some support from recent court judgments. Kherigi explained that the tension between mayors and governors will likely continue.

There is a debate about how threatening municipalities are to Saied's regime. "They are definitely a space for rearranging political relations," explained Salman. Municipalities continue to be the most direct way that citizens interact with the state in their everyday lives, and the World Bank-funded [Tunisia Urban Development and Local Governance Program](#) gives citizens the chance to prioritize services and investments in their neighborhoods. With a new cycle of funding approaching, international donors could help safeguard these opportunities for citizen participation without directly supporting the Saied regime. The municipalities will likely remain an intense site of struggle for political space.

### 3. International pressure and community dynamism

Saied's interventions have certainly threatened the democratic developments made after the Arab Uprising. Although, Salman was quick to point out that these are not "ruptures," but rather "continuities with openings" or new possible directions. Yerkes sees a role for the international community, especially if the G7 can coordinate and provide a "menu of carrots" focused on explicit public benchmarks of positive behavior.

An additional focus will be on the dynamism and mobilization on the ground in Tunisia. Civil society will play an important role but is unlikely to be united. There was a vibrant debate about whether civil society organizations should participate in the upcoming referendum on the new constitution. The struggling economy will place added pressure on Saied as well. Finally, a central and formative struggle is around the law, and the extent of legal action that Saied can take. "The question of legality" still matters, Kherigi said, emphasizing how struggles over local governance are become judicialized as municipalities resort to the courts to protect their prerogatives.

#### Additional readings

Mohamed Dhia Hammami and Sharan Grewal, "How much popular support does Tunisia's president really have?" *Washington Post* The Monkey Cage. Available: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/26/tunisia-saied-coup-backsliding-democracy/>.

Sarah Yerkes, "Cutting Aid Won't Pull Tunisia Away From Authoritarianism." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Available: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/06/02/cutting-aid-won-t-pull-tunisia-away-from-authoritarianism-pub-87244>.

Intissar Kherigi, "Municipal Boundaries and the Politics of Space in Tunisia." *GLD Working Paper Series*. Available: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3929425](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3929425).

Lana Salman and Bernadette Baird-Zars, "From the Fragments Up: Municipal Margins of Maneuver in Syria and Tunisia." *Middle East Law and Governance*, 11(2), 244-282 Available: [https://brill.com/view/journals/melg/11/2/article-p244\\_244.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/melg/11/2/article-p244_244.xml).

Full Policy Roubtable, Recorded via Zoom and published via YouTube, [watch here](#).

## About GLD

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) is a research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The institute is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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## Contact

Department of Political Science,  
University of Gothenburg  
Box 711, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden  
Visiting address: Sprängkullsgatan 19,  
Gothenburg  
contact@gld.gu.se  
[Twitter](#)  
[LinkedIn](#)  
[Facebook](#)