



Power Grab in Tunisia

For Prelims: Tunisia Geography, It's Neighbouring Countries and Waterways

For Mains: Effects of change in constitution on the country, Types of Government System

Why in News?

Recently, protests have erupted in **Tunisia** after a **referendum was passed** to approve a **new Constitution** that would **turn the country back into a Presidential System**.



Why have Protests Erupted?

- Turning the country **back into a Presidential System** will institutionalize the **one-man reign of President Kais Saied**, who suspended the **elected Parliament** and awarded more powers to himself in 2021.
- Protestors have warned that the **new Constitution would erase whatever democratic gains Tunisia has made since the 2011 Arab Spring** (Jasmine) revolution and push the country back into an authoritarian slide.

What do we know about the Arab Spring?

▪ About Arab Spring:

- Arab Spring, wave of **pro-democracy protests** and **uprisings** that took place in the **Middle East and North Africa** beginning in 2010 and 2011, challenging some of the region's entrenched authoritarian regimes.
- The wave began when **protests in Tunisia and Egypt** toppled their regimes in quick succession, inspiring similar attempts in other Arab countries.
- **Not every country saw success** in the protest movement, however, demonstrators expressing their political and economic grievances were often **met with violent crackdowns** by their countries' security forces.

▪ Tunisia:

- Among the countries that saw popular protests bringing down dictatorships in 2011, **Tunisia was the only one that witnessed a successful transition to [democracy](#)**.
- The Arab Spring protests began in Tunisia in December 2010, **leading to the fall of the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had been in power since 1987**.
 - It was also known as **Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia**.
- Ben Ali had to flee the country in the face of the mass uprising.
 - Quickly, **protests spread to other Arab countries such as Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria**.

▪ Egypt:

- While protesters brought down the 30-year-long dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, **the revolution did not last long in that country**.
- In 2013, the **military seized power** toppling the elected government of President Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader.

▪ Libya:

- In Libya, the protests against Moammar Gaddafi slipped into a **[civil war](#)**, which saw a **military intervention** by the **[North Atlantic Treaty Organisation \(NATO\)](#)**.
 - The NATO intervention toppled the Gaddafi regime (the Libyan leader was later assassinated), but the **country fell into chaos and anarchy, which continue to haunt it even today**.

▪ Other Countries:

- **In Bahrain**, the **Shia majority** country ruled by a Sunni monarchy, neighbouring Saudi Arabia sent troops to crush protests in Manama's Pearl Square.
- **In Yemen**, President Ali Abdullah Saleh had to relinquish power, **but the country fell into a civil war**, leading to the rise of the **Shia Houthi rebels**, who now control capital Sana'a, and the subsequent Saudi attack on the impoverished country.
- **In Syria**, protests turned into a proxy civil war, with President Bashar al-Assad's rivals backing his enemies, and his allies, including Hezbollah, Iran and Russia, backing the regime.

What is the reason behind the Political Crisis in Tunisia?

▪ Existing System:

- **The 2014 Constitution** put in place a **mixed parliamentary and presidential system**.
 - Both the President and Parliament **were directly elected by the voters**.
 - The **President** was to oversee the **military and foreign affairs**, while the **Prime Minister**, elected with the support of a majority of lawmakers, was in charge of the day-to-day affairs of governance.

▪ Problems in Tunisia:

- The country had **nine governments between 2011 and 2021**.
 - In the democratic elections, the Islamist Ennahda party, which has ideological links to the pan-Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement, emerged as a main political force in the country, which upset the secular sections. The polity remained fractious.
- Its economy was already in a bad shape, and the **[COVID-19](#)** crisis made it worse.
 - Tunisia has one of the highest per capita COVID death rates in the world.
- Amid the mounting economic and healthcare crisis, protests broke out against the government in July last year.

- Protesters stormed the offices of the Ennahda, the ruling party.
- **Change in Constitution:**
 - **To stop the unrest, Mr. Saied moved in**, sacking the Ennahda-backed Prime Minister Hichem Mechich and suspending Parliament, plunging the country into a constitutional crisis.
 - Under the 2014 Constitution, such crises should be settled by a constitutional court, but the court had not been formed yet.
 - This allowed the President a free hand to rule the country by decrees.
 - He declared a state of **emergency**.
 - Appointed a **Prime Minister** to run the government.
 - **Dissolved the suspended Parliament** earlier this year while simultaneously moving to rewrite the Constitution, awarding himself more powers.

What are the new Changes in Constitution?

- While it leaves most of the **personal freedoms guaranteed by the 2014 Constitution intact**, the new charter seeks to take the country back to the presidential system, undercutting the powers of Parliament.
 - **The President will have ultimate authority to:**
 - Form a government
 - Name Ministers (without Parliament's approval)
 - Appoint judges
 - Present legislation directly to the legislature.
- All the above-mentioned changes would also make it **practically impossible for the lawmakers to remove the President from office.**

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Q. Recently, a series of uprisings of people referred to as 'Arab Spring' originally started from (2014)

- (a) Egypt
- (b) Lebanon
- (c) Syria
- (d) Tunisia

Ans: (d)

Explanation:

- The Arab Spring began in December, 2010 when a Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the arbitrary seizing of his vegetable stand by police over failure to obtain a permit. Bouazizi's sacrificial act served as a catalyst in the so-called Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia.
- Activists in other countries in the region were inspired by the regime change in Tunisia and began to protest similar authoritarian governments in their own nations. The first democratic parliamentary elections in Tunisia were held in October, 2011.
- By early 2011, it had spread into what came to be known as the Arab Spring—a wave of protests, uprisings, and unrest that spread across the Arabic speaking countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Pro-democratic protests, which spread rapidly due to social media, ended up toppling the governments of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.
- However, in some cases, these protests morphed into full-scale civil wars, as evidenced in countries such as Libya, Syria and Yemen.
- Therefore, option (d) is the correct answer.

[Source: TH](#)

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