

A slow collapse in Tunisia

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In mid-January, two Tunisian teenagers were found frozen to death in a refrigerated boat bound for Italy. They had been hiding there to seek a better future in Europe.

This tragedy followed the death of 40 Tunisian migrants a few hours after they set sail from Sfax. The vast majority of migrants departing from this Tunisian coastal town are from sub-Saharan Africa, but almost one in five migrants leaving Tunisia is from that country.

SERIOUS ECONOMIC CRISIS

The country's disastrous political and economic situation is driving people to Europe, and for several months now Tunisia has also been a transit country for crossings. Tunisia is in the throes of a serious economic crisis, with food shortages, price rises and a huge state debt. And in a country where strongly neoliberal economic policies have been in place since the years under Ben Ali, the neoliberal reforms did not stop after the revolution. The country is heavily in debt, and the only way out is to continue borrowing by accepting the IMF's reforms.

Stuck in this logic, against which he has no solution, the current president, Kaïs Saïed, is sinking into totalitarianism. Dozens of opponents have been arrested on completely fabricated pretexts. As the Tunisian people commemorate the 12th anniversary of the Revolution, not even journalists are spared prison. On 10 January, Zied El Heni, a freelance journalist, appeared in court in Tunisia on a charge of "contempt" against a Tunisian government minister whom he had criticised on IFM radio. The prosecutor requested immediate detention under a law that gives the authorities extensive powers to clamp down on freedom of expression.

STATE RACISM

The other facet of Kaïs Saïed's policy is to descend into the foulest racism by targeting black migrants in transit. After agreeing to act as border guards for Europe, almost 70,000 migrants were arrested in 2023 by Tunisian forces as they tried to cross the Mediterranean. Since the summer of 2023, Black people from sub-Saharan Africa in Tunisia have been the victims of manhunts and veritable pogroms under the benevolent gaze of the Tunis government. Arbitrary arrests on the basis of skin colour, forced transport to the borders, to the Libyan desert or the Algerian mountains have become the political management of migration under the guise of the "great replacement" theory.

This border management policy in no way prevents people from leaving, nor - alas - from being shipwrecked or killed. The Tunisian people, who have shown all their strength in active support for the Palestinian people since the massacres in Gaza, must impose a political response commensurate with what is at stake, against Kaïs Saïed's policy if necessary.

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