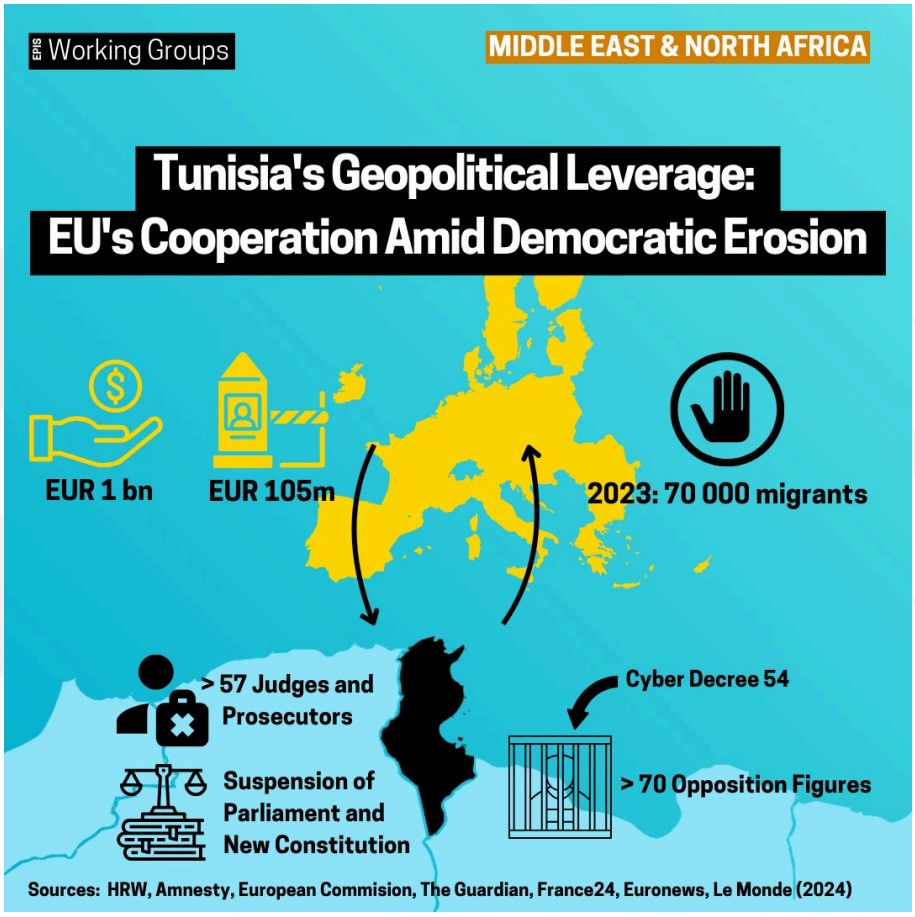
Tunisia's Geopolitical Leverage

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Tunisia's President Kais Saied has now ruled the country for three years since his election in July 2021. The next elections are likely to be held this October, with Saied expected to be re-elected. During his first term, Tunisia's political landscape underwent significant transformations, raising concerns about the country's democratic trajectory. Consequently, the European Union (EU) faces a challenging dilemma: it relies on Tunisia's collaboration to manage migration flows, yet this partnership also entails financial support for Saied's administration.

Once seen as the only democratic success story of the 2011 Arab Spring, one of the most notable developments was Saied's decision to suspend parliament and dismiss the prime minister in July 2021. This move, described by

many as a coup, was followed by a prolonged period of rule by decree. In July 2022, Saied introduced a new constitution, which was approved through a referendum marked by low voter turnout and allegations of irregularities. The new constitution significantly expanded presidential powers, reduced the role of parliament, and altered the judiciary's structure, effectively consolidating power in the executive branch.

In addition to these structural changes, the Saied administration has also been criticized for its crackdown on dissent. So far, more than 70 opposition figures, judges, activists, and media professionals have been arrested under various pretexts, including allegations of conspiracy against state security. These arrests have been facilitated by the enactment of new laws, such as Cyber Decree 54, which imposes severe penalties for spreading "fake news" or content deemed harmful to public order. Critics argue that these measures are being used to silence opposition and curb freedom of expression. Besides the arrests, Saied inter alia also used the decree to erode judicial independence by dismissing more than 57 judges and prosecutors.

The political repression has not deterred the international community from engaging with Tunisia, particularly the EU. Tunisia's strategic location makes it a critical partner in controlling migration flows across the Mediterranean. Despite concerns over Tunisia's democratic backsliding, the EU's financial aid underscores the geopolitical importance of cooperation with Tunisia on migration issues. On 16 July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed a Memorandum of Understanding including a EUR 1 billion financial support package to tackle Tunisia's economic crisis and EUR 105 million to enhance its border management. The European Commission is criticized for a EUR 150 million release last year, which critics argue directly bolstered Saied's administration.

On the other hand, in the past years, Tunisia's National Guard intercepted 70.000 migrants in 2023. This year, already more than 21.000 migrants were intercepted between January and May 2024 with fewer than 8.000 successfully crossing into Italy. This is a threefold decrease compared to the same period in 2023.

Since the measures Tunisia has taken seem to work in the EU's favor, it thus has a strong geopolitical bargaining position. The importance of this relationship is underscored by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's four visits to Tunisia within a year, as of April 2024. The international community, particularly the EU, now faces a challenging dilemma in balancing the need for cooperation on migration with the imperative of supporting democratic principles.

Key Events for Graphic: