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# Tunisian Democracy at a Crossroads: A Comparative Analysis of Beji Caid Essebsi and Kais Saied Regimes

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## ABSTRAK

Sebagai negara demokrasi baru, Tunisia cukup rentan terhadap pengikisan demokrasi. Penerapan demokrasi di negara tersebut cukup efektif pada masa kepemimpinan Beji Caid Essebsi menghasilkan indeks demokrasi yang tinggi yang didorong oleh berbagai kebijakan yang mendukung penerapan sistem ini. Namun, kualitas demokrasi Tunisia menurun secara signifikan sejak Presiden Kais Saied berkuasa pada tahun 2019. Pembubaran parlemen, pemecatan perdana menteri, pemberlakuan kebebasan berekspresi bagi anggota dewan, dan reformasi pemilu sepihak yang bertujuan untuk mengkonsolidasikan kekuasaannya adalah beberapa contohnya. Pola ini menimbulkan pertanyaan tentang sifat demokrasi yang berulang setelah pergantian presiden. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya mempelajari sifat-sifat kepemimpinan dan keyakinan politik dari para pemimpin yang sedang berkuasa dalam membentuk arah demokrasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengekstrapolasi karakteristik kepemimpinan kedua presiden, menilai orientasi ideologi mereka untuk menentukan sikap mereka terhadap demokrasi dan dampaknya. Penelitian ini mengimplementasikan kombinasi antara Leaders Trait Analysis (LTA) sebagai bagian dari pendekatan kuantitatif dan teknik Process Tracing sebagai bagian kualitatif dengan mengungkap penampilan publik (wawancara dan pidato) dan menggabungkannya dengan kejadian historis sebagai bukti empiris yang akan menunjukkan kepribadian pemimpin secara komprehensif untuk menjelaskan atribut kognitif dan disposisi yang mencakup berbagai kecenderungan terhadap demokratisasi.

Kata kunci: dinamika demokrasi Tunisia, kemunduran demokrasi, Analisis Karakter Pemimpin, presiden Tunisia pasca-revolusi, dan reformasi pemilu.

## ABSTRACT

As a new democracy, Tunisia is quite vulnerable to democratic erosion. The implementation of democracy in the country was quite effective during the leadership of Beji Caid Essebsi, resulting in a high democracy index driven by various policies that supported the implementation of this system. However, Tunisia's quality of democracy significantly declined since President Kais Saied took power in 2019. The dissolution of Parliament, the prime minister's dismissal, the introduction of freedom of expression for council members, and unilateral electoral reforms aimed at consolidating his power are some cases of proof. This pattern raises questions about the recurring nature of democracy after presidential changes. Therefore, this research highlights the importance of studying the leadership traits and political beliefs of incumbent leaders in shaping the direction of democracy. This research aims to extrapolate

the leadership characteristics of the two presidents, assessing their ideological orientation to determine their attitudes toward democracy and its impact. This study implements a combination of Leaders Trait Analysis (LTA) as part of a quantitative approach and Process Tracing techniques as a qualitative part by revealing public appearances (interviews and speeches) and combining them with historical events as empirical evidence that will show a comprehensive leader's personality to explain the cognitive and dispositional attributes that encompass various tendencies toward democratization.

Keywords: dynamics of Tunisian democracy, democracy backsliding, Leader's Trait Analysis, Tunisian presidents post-revolution, and electoral reforms.

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## INTRODUCTION

After experiencing the Arab Revolt in 2011, Tunisia is a prominent example among Middle East and North African (MENA) countries witnessing significant political transformation (Gandolfo 2015). The Arab Spring constitutes a seminal event in Tunisian history, precipitating the downfall of the authoritarian regime led by Ben Ali and catalyzing the domino effect across other Middle Eastern countries. While serving as a harbinger of democratic aspirations within the MENA region, the aftermath of the Arab Spring witnessed varying degrees of success in the transition towards democratic governance among participating countries (Lawler 2021).

The MENA countries, including Tunisia, have different backgrounds from those of European countries and the US. So, implementing the same political system will also be exceedingly challenging, even though Tunisia has started implementing a democratic system (Darmawan, 2018). Arab Barometer divides two groups of countries in the Middle East related to the development of democracy, namely *authoritarian-leaning countries* and *democratic-leaning countries* (Rahman-Arab Barometer 2018; Lebaron and Hickert 2019). Tunisia is a part of *democratic-leaning country* due to the great possibility of becoming a country with good democratic performance, and the election is the most meaningful (Jamal 2022). It was proven by the free and open general election in 2014 when Beji Caid Essebsi was Tunisia's first elected president. Essebsi was a candidate from the Nidaa Tounes party and made many

contributions to the development and progress of Tunisia even before he took office as president.

When Essebsi became the president, the implementation of democracy was very successful and reached the highest level of public freedom. In his era, he also succeeded in creating the constitution of gender equality and became a role model for other Middle Eastern countries. However, everything began to shift after Essebsi passed away, and the second free and fair election was held, in which Kais Saied won as his successor. Kais Saied's leadership was inversely proportional to the leadership adopted by Essebsi (Aljazeera 2019).

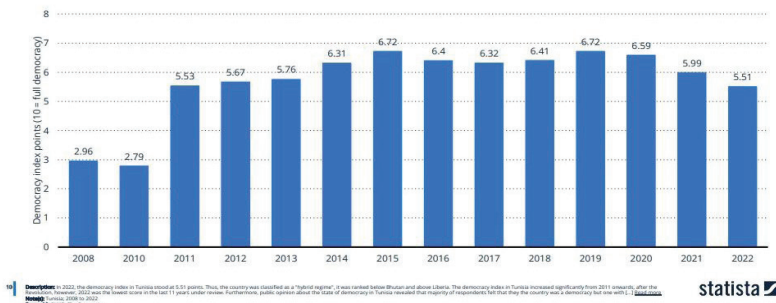
Kais Saied was elected independently (without a political party). Even though he was an independent delegate, he received numerous endorsements from youth groups (Sadiki 2019). Saied instigated a series of disruptive measures throughout his tenure, including the suspension and subsequent dissolution of Parliament. Furthermore, he exercised executive authority by dismissing several prime ministers whose policies did not align with his agenda (Yerkes and Al-Mailam 2022).

The democratization progress achieved much progress in the Essebsi regime has experienced significant declines (see Figure 1). It made Tunisia struggle to maintain the democratic system since many upheavals and chaos have occurred in the country (Grewal, 2019). Following their implementation under relatively condensed timeframes, the trajectories of democratic governance experienced a notable divergence, eliciting apprehension within the ruling regime. It is imperative to discern the underlying factors contributing to the substantial disparities observed between the two regimes, particularly concerning the execution of democratic principles (Mohsen-Finan 2018). These differences show that Tunisia is currently in a democratic crisis, especially during the Saied era, which also tried to weaken the *party system*, which made his position advantageous in maintaining his power, including winning the next election.

Figure 1. Democracy Dynamics Index in Tunisia

Democracy index in Tunisia from 2008 to 2022

Democracy index in Tunisia 2008-2022



Source: Statista (2023)

In previous research regarding the dynamics of democracy in Tunisia, most studies focus on institutional matters. The author argues that besides geopolitics, socioeconomic, or political economy conditions that can shape governance, including the consolidation of democracy in a country, the leadership of the elite, who lead the country based on individual traits and political beliefs, also exert a significant influence. Furthermore, the elite serve as skippers who can steer the country toward either prosperity or peril as their leadership style (Brummer 2021).

Therefore, looking at significant differences after the presidential transition in Tunisia makes the author believe that there is something to do with the leadership trajectories that influence the different results of both regimes. The author wants to answer the research question: «*Why did Tunisia experience great democratic progress under the Essebsi regime yet encounter backsliding during the Kais Saied regime?*» The author will focus on unraveling the Political Beliefs as a causal mechanism by analysing the Leader’s traits (Idiosyncratic Aspects) of the two leaders having conflicting policy outputs to explain the phenomenon that occurred in Tunisia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous scholarly inquiries have examined the phenomenon of

democratic dynamics in Tunisia after the Arab Spring. However, within this body of research, a discernible lacuna exists, which this research aims to address, thereby enhancing the collective understanding and application of knowledge in both academic discourse and practical domains. Discussing the dynamics of democracy in Tunisia,

Tunisia has a distinctive experience from other Middle Eastern countries in the context of the successful implementation of democracy (Gandolfo 2015). In the case of Egypt, according to Mushlih (2016), Egypt has experienced democratic failure due to ideological differences and failure of coalition management between Islamic groups and secular groups that led to conflict between them, in addition to the low commitment of actors in the country to democracy as an adequate political system that ultimately created political instability and even the occurrence of various military coups that became a sign of the failure of democracy in Egypt.

This is in contrast to the Tunisia case which according to Rivera-Escartin (2022) the main success of democracy in Tunisia is because of the initial effort in the Essebsi era to create a big coalition between two crucial parties, namely Nidaa Tounes and Enahda, which resulted in advanced Tunisia policy-making through consensus and bolstering the implementation of democracy due to the stability of Tunisia domestic condition which ultimately creates democratic success. Moreover, Yahmed (2019) argues that Tunisia was prosperous since the Tunisian population is dominated by well-educated people with a high tolerance culture.

External factors influence Tunisia's successful implementation of democracy as Millet (2021) explains how Western actors such as the United States, Germany, Turkey, and others have reacted to democratization efforts by contributing to the financial and diplomatic aid that substantially helped to supplement the already ripe environment for democracy and also helps validate, legitimize, and strengthen all the goals set by democratic governance in Tunisia. Additionally, Ahmad Sahide, Yoyo, and Muhammad (2022) stated that Tunisia has succeeded in consolidating its democracy

where since 2015-2019 the country's democracy index was very high, reaching approximately 6.72/10.0 by holding open and fair general elections also because of the existence of *twin tolerance* which achieved consensus on the concept of civil state. It implied that Tunisia was previously an excellent example of implementing democracy by creating policies to bolster democracy, such as equality and high freedom of speech.

Subsequent studies attempt to answer *why democracy in Tunisia is experiencing backsliding*. Darmawan (2018) stated that democracy is an ideology that immensely contrasts with the values and culture of the regime in Tunisia. In simple terms, democracy cannot yet be entirely accepted. Then, Özcan (2018) and Wahyudi et al. (2020) explained that Tunisia is a very dynamic country with a heterogeneous population, which is the reason for rising internal challenges from various interest groups such as various tribes, religions, sects, and interest groups, which have led to various provocations and even hate speech, the problem of the sectarianism which at the end created instability and impacted on political dynamics. The pressures and difficulties that make it vulnerable to protests, in general prosecutions, are carried out to get better governance and economic management than democracy.

Moreover, Brumberg (2019) stated that the different desires and interests in the Tunisian state system are still debated; some want to leave Autocracy, and some think that Autocracy is the best system to implement in Tunisia since most of the countries in MENA countries have undergone revolution tend to return to their original character, which is authoritarian regimes. Democracy is considered an ideology some pro-western groups use for public legitimacy only to gain power.

According to Lawler (2021) and Koehler (2023), populism and polarisation are the reasons for democracy backsliding in Tunisia. The main problem in Tunisia is caused by the loss of social trust due to the bipolar party system because of the polarization in the secular-religious divide, even though there is an economic crisis and socioeconomic divisions. It was the reason why Saeid, as a

populist, was able to be elected president of the country. When he was elected, populism increased drastically and caused an even more significant loss of social trust. With his populist leadership, when COVID-19 attacked the world, Tunisia received opposition from internal and even external parties of Tunisia, like the United States, because President Saied carried out many controversial policies that weakened democracy, such as dismissing his prime minister and dissolving his Parliament and constrain the freedom of speech, this condition caused Tunisia to collapse causing various imbalances in the political system.

Lastly, Daniel Huber and Barbara Pisciotta (2023) explained that disengagement and disillusionment with the political class are characterized by the gradual, invisible, and formally legal erosion of the quality of democracy. There is also the conflict between the legislature and the president. Furthermore, the increasing polarisation accompanied by Saied's policies has changed the landscape of where he can use that polarisation to support his political project. That is how populism and continued polarisation can determine the setback of democracy in Tunisia.

Based on these previous studies, the gap that the author encountered was the absence of research that analyzed leaders in depth or the question of "*Who Rules?*" in Tunisia. Those previous studies will contribute as sources of information needed for this research. However, this research will focus on the causes of the democratic dynamics (success and then decline) in Tunisia by reviewing Political Beliefs as a causal mechanism by analyzing the leader's traits to explain the phenomena that occur in the country, to explain why democracy can experience development and decline based on the leader's traits. Therefore, profiling techniques will be carried out to contribute to explaining the phenomena and be helpful in the advancement of science and everyday life.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research will adopt a multifaceted theoretical framework to elucidate the intricacies of the democratization dynamics observed

in Tunisia. First, the Leadership Traits and Political Beliefs approach aims to unravel the underlying mechanisms influencing the trajectory of democratization in Tunisia. Explanation of the rationality of a leader related to the cognitive to determine decisions about everything that happens in the environment can be done by exploring the Leader's traits. This approach will lead to determining the characteristics of the regime's leadership, namely Essebsi and Saied characteristics that will lead to a belief system or political tendency that guides the direction of policy, explaining what triggers the Leader's decision according to the environment (Cuhadar et al. 2017).

Leadership traits are one of the approaches used to analyze policy analysis. In this case, it is observed through verbal statements and cognitive abilities related to how the character and traits of a leader are built, and at the end, they become policy determinants that are generated based on their experience by elaborating on seven characteristics such as *the ability to control events, the need for power, the level of self-confidence, the ability to differentiate (complexity), task orientation, the level of trust in others, and in-group bias* (see table 1). These characteristics will determine a leader's leadership style, such as Opportunistic, Expansionist, and Actively Independent (Hermann 2003).

These traits are paramount in understanding the causes of differences in policy and the results of the decisions of the two leaders. Essebsi is intensely focused on developing the country by maximizing the implementation of democracy. On the contrary, in the Saied regime, the efforts made by Essebsi were in vain because Saied, with his strategy and agenda, wanted to bring Tunisia back to the authoritarian regime and started to impose many restrictions on its society. It is essential to analyze the background of his decision, especially Saied, who created democracy backsliding in Tunisia (Brummer et al. 2020).

Table 1. Personality Characteristics in Leadership Trait

Leaders Trait	Description
<b>Belief in the Ability to Control Events</b>	Perception of own degree of control over the political world
<b>Need for Power</b>	Interest in developing, preserving, or reinstating own power
<b>Conceptual Complexity</b>	Ability to distinguish complexities of political life
<b>Self-Confidence</b>	Notion of self-importance, and of his/her capacity to take on the political environment
<b>In Group Bias</b>	Belief that own group constitutes the center of the political world
<b>Distrust of Others</b>	Suspicious, skepticism, worry of others than own group
<b>Task Focus</b>	Concentration on problem-solving vs. building relationships

Sources: Hermann (1993;2003)

Meanwhile, *Political Beliefs* are a combination of various elements of belief, including leadership traits, that lead to a diagnosis of the context of action that can determine the most effective way (strategy) to achieve goals (George 1969). Moreover, leader beliefs are conceptualized as a cause-and-effect mechanism that leads to decisions based on the perception that has been developed regarding this reality regarding the benefits or losses that will be incurred. Cognitive abilities are important in assessing how to respond to an event so that it can bring benefits to themselves and sometimes to the country (Brummer 2021). Therefore, what happens is that the leader will focus on pre-existing beliefs based on information, stereotypes, cognitive biases, or basic characteristics that both people have that influence their emotions when making decisions. Then, it becomes the most effective strategy for achieving goals (Walker and Schafer 2006).

This study uses Leader’s Trait Analysis (LTA) to analyze the traits or personalities of leaders who lead to leadership style, focusing on spontaneous material such as speeches and interviews with the media. LTA has been widely used to study leaders’ personalities in various countries (Brummer et al. 2020). LTA will show that the personality traits of leaders vary; the seven traits described above are systematically related to the tendency of leaders, specifically in this research, to react to the democratic system and how they run it (Hermann 2003). It is also related to openness to information, advice, or external support, which will influence the quality of the decision-making process or policies implemented in the country based on these tendencies or what can be called political beliefs. Seven combinations of traits can specifically produce particular behavior by a leader, and in this case, it could also be about how they perceived the democratic system.

Table 2. LTA Types on Democracy

Leader Compromise to Democracy	Leader Types	Component Traits
Responsive to Democracy System	Respecter/Challenger	Belief in the Ability to Control Events + the need for Power
Openness to Information and external support	Closed/Open	Complexity + Self- Confidence
Motivation Toward Democracy and Problem	Advantageous or Disadvantageous and focusing on problems or relationships.	Task focus + in-group bias + distrust of others
Leadership Style	Active Independent, Collegial, Evangelical, Directive, Expansionist, Incremental, Influential, Opportunistic	Responsiveness + Openness + Task Motivation

Source: Adapted from Hermann (2003)

Since Leader’s Trait Analysis relates to how leaders challenge or respect the constraints or unusual events, even more, their motivation

toward them, in this research, the democratic transition is an utterly unfamiliar system, so its implementation can be a considerable constraint for the Tunisian government, leaders and the society. For this reason, the decision-making process or the Leader's tendency towards democracy will be examined. How does the leader respond to this matter with respect (to develop it) or constraints (to make it weak), and what is his motivation for it?

According to Dyson (2006), Hermann (1993;2003), Kille and Scully (2003), Cuhadar et al. (2017), Brummer et al. (2020), and Brummer (2021), the authors determined three main aspects of leadership types (traits) outputs in this research: first *Responsive to a Democracy System*, aspect is influenced by two traits namely “*confidence in their ability to control*” (BACE)), and “*need for power*” (PWR). The fundamental perception is that leaders with high *confidence in their ability to control events* and a *high need for power* tend to challenge democracy. In contrast, leaders with a low need for power and low confidence in the ability to control (or low in one aspect) tend to respect democracy.

The next aspect of the trait is *Openness to information and external support*, which are influenced by two variables, namely “*conceptual complexity*” (CC) and “*self-confidence*” (SC). Leaders with high scores on both traits are predicted to be open to information and external support. In contrast, leaders with low scores on both traits are usually closed from information and external support. These two composite traits are combined with the Leader's motivation to produce a typology of eight different leadership styles. It is believed that how a leader reacts to things around him is based on the interaction of structures and norms, rules, and principles used to carry out these interactions (Hermann 2003). Specifically, this paper will discuss how these leaders interact with the democratic system.

The third aspect is *motivation toward democracy and problems*. Influenced by three aspects, “*Task focus*” (TASK) is slightly different because it shows the relative emphasis of a leader on interactions with other people in dealing with a problem, in simple terms, the

concentration on problem-solving or building relationships. Leaders with *high focus* tend to be focused on problem-solving; on the other hand, leaders with low task focus tend to build relationships. The other two traits are “*in-group bias*” (IGB) and “*distrust of others*” (DIS), which are related to motivation toward democracy. Leaders with low scores in these two traits tend to maintain and preserve democracy. At the same time, leaders with high scores of these traits tend to undermine democracy.

Table 3. World Leaders LTA Score

LTA	Traits	Score
		World Leaders (Average of 284 Leaders)
BACE	Belief in one’s ability to control events	0.35 (.05)
PWR	Need for power and influence	0.26 (.05)
CC	Conceptual complexity	0.59 (.06)
SC	Self-confidence	0.36 (.10)
TASK	Task focus/orientation	0.63 (.07)
DIS	General distrust or suspiciousness of others	0.13 (.06)
IGB	In-group bias	0.15 (.05)

Source: Hermann (1993;2003) and Cuhadar et al. (2017)

To determine the high or low LTA scores of the two Tunisian leaders, it is necessary to use benchmarks from the average world leaders as shown in *Table 3*, this will make the results in this study have good validity based on the analysis that will be carried out by comparing the score of Tunisia Leaders with the average score of the world leader.

Then, those factors can determine the success or decline of democracy in Tunisia in different regimes based on different characteristics of the leaders, so it becomes crucial to understand and explore in depth to explain the character of Essebsi and Saied toward democracy and how their tendencies towards this system

by determining the leadership style resulted from Responsiveness, Openness, and motivation. The primary assumption of this research is that Essebsi should *respect democracy, be more open to information, and be motivated to uphold democracy*. At the same time, Saied has to *challenge democracy, be close to information, and be motivated to undermine democracy*.

The following approach is *Democracy-Backsliding* to determine how Tunisia has experienced a democracy decline in its current system. Democracy-Backsliding is explained by Nancy Bermeo (2016), discussing the problems faced by democracy, not only those experiencing setbacks but also those related to slow progress. This backsliding can take the form of the destruction of democracy itself or the weakening of existing democratic institutions. Focusing on *executive aggrandizement* occurs when the elected executive weakens oversight of executive power and makes institutional changes that hinder opposition forces from opposing executive preferences. The last is strategically manipulating the election; not a few democratic countries are using the current manipulation strategy to win elections (Bermeo 2016).

The last one is that the approach is still related to democracy backsliding significantly and adequately explains the current events in Tunisia, and one of the mechanisms it uses is to create *electoral reform* (change the electoral law). The electoral reform is influenced by many aspects, including a form of Power Maximisation perspective where politicians want to control the electoral system's choices so that they can maximise their power. *Electoral reform* is a complex process involving many actors with different motivations or interests. The desire for power dominates these motivations but can also be motivated by values or a combination. (Renwick 2010).

In Tunisia's case, Saied changed the constitution, which changed the system of government in the country from parliamentary to presidential, with the alleged action of maximising his power. He also changed the electoral constitution primarily because he was in power and sought to maintain his position and maximise his power. Saied's actions also weakened the party system by limiting the role

of parties in elections and government positions, especially in the executive and government positions. The constitution cornered the existence of parties because Saied, the elected president, came from an outsider or non-party, so he took this action to benefit himself in the next election (Katz and Mair 1994).

## METHODS

The method in this research will use primarily a qualitative approach but with the support of quantitative data in Leadership Traits Analysis. Qualitative analysis seeks to explain a phenomenon that occurs in the real world, utilising descriptive analysis in the form of written data from various sources in the form of interviews, books, journals, theses, and various official website pages on the internet (Thomas 2005).

Furthermore, since this research focuses on implementing democracy affected by a Leader's Personality, it requires data support from leaders profiling by exploring the scores of seven traits. This research aims to answer the questions contained in the problem formulation. The focus of data collection is to discover the leader's traits of the regime that lead to the political beliefs that induce policy through leadership profiling techniques combined with Process Tracing.

In data collection, the author will use a combination of Leaders Trait Analysis (LTA) as part of the quantitative approach and Process Tracing technique by unraveling the historical event in combination with the public appearance that will show the personalities in a more comprehensive (Hermann 2003).

The author used *ProfilerPlusis*, a software developed by Nick Levine and Michael D Young from Social Science Automation, to determine the score of leadership traits. This software will determine the percentage of certain words and phrases used by the leader code of words. The percentages for each leader can be compared to a reference group to determine whether the leaders use certain words and phrases. A trait's high, low, or average value compares personality traits in decision-making based on the world

leader average (Cuhadar et al. 2017). In practice, if the traits are sufficiently stable, it will provide greater confidence in the validity of the LTA approach, where certain words spoken consistently and spontaneously will describe the character and beliefs.

Meanwhile, Process Tracing is a data collection and identification methodology that is a specific part of the process to explain the causal mechanism relationship between variables by interrogating or exploring historical narratives based on crucial events that occurred. From this, the research analysed how the sequence of events, particularly on the individual experience, produces two different outcomes in two regimes (Beach and Peterson 2013). It also used «Path dependence» to see a structural or personal pattern in history that has a critical juncture in sequencing the period of history that determines the differences between the two leaders (Pierson 2000). By combining LTA and Process Tracing techniques, the result will be more comprehensive with the mechanism of looking at the background or history of two leaders and associating with how they figure in public (through speech and interviews) to assess their personalities and how they manage their behavior that will depict their personality or traits. These techniques will also show a precise critical moment in the sequence to explain what creates their behavioral or political beliefs and what motivates the Leader in their policymaking.

This study attempts to elucidate both leaders' underlying political ideologies (Essebsi and Saied). The research seeks to elucidate the divergent outcomes witnessed under their leadership style by juxtaposing these elements. It provides insights into the causal factors precipitating the democratic incline during Essebsi and the democratic decline during Kais Saied's regime provides insights into the causal factors precipitating the democratic incline during Essebsi and the democratic decline during Kais Saied's regime.

## RESULTS

Initiating the discourse on the discernible disparity in Tunisia's

political landscape between the regimes of Caid Essebsi and Kais Saied and the subsequent decline in democratic governance despite initial progress, the inquiry centers on a meticulous analysis of the Leader's traits. This effort requires thoroughly examining the profiles and coalition dynamics characterising their administrations, providing insight into the causal mechanisms underlying the observed shifts in Tunisia's political system.

### BEJI CAID ESSEBSI'S PROFILE

Mohamed Beji Caid Essebsi was a politician born in 1926 and passed away in 2019. He became the first president of Tunisia to be freely elected. Essebsi was born into an elite family in Tunisia; he is the great-grandson of Ismail Caid Essebsi, a Mamluk leader who became an important person after becoming a government member (Aljazeera 2019).

Essebsi was a former lawyer who studied in Paris during the French colonial period. After returning, he took part in efforts to gain independence from France. After Tunisia's independence in 1956, Essebsi held many vital positions in government, ranging from local government and social affairs to tourism. During the previous presidency, Habib Bourgiba, Essebsi's career skyrocketed when he became national security director in 1963 (Rashid and AbuEish 2019). During the Bin Ali presidency, after Bourgoba was removed from office, Essebsi was elected to become a Parliament member and a parliamentary speaker from 1990 to 1991. During his tenure, he became a politician and served as interior minister and speaker in Parliament (BBC 2019).

Subsequently, Essebsi had a vacuum from the world of politics and returned to become prime minister after Ben Ali was removed from office. However, his position as prime minister was only temporary because the Ennahda party, a moderate Islamic party, took over power in Tunisia. After that, he formed the Nidaa Tounes party as a secular party, which succeeded in winning the pooling in the first parliamentary elections after the Ben Ali era (Brumberg 2019). Before becoming president, he had contributed much to the

development of Tunisia, including the development of democracy. He also played a role in bridging the upheaval between the Nidaa Tounes movement and the Enahda Islamic Party, which dominates in Tunisia so that it created stability (Rivera-Escartin 2022)

Even in 2014, Essebsi officially represented his party as a candidate in the presidential election, where he won the first general election with 55.68% of the vote. Although it is somewhat controversial because Essebsi adheres to a secular system by raising quite sensitive social issues, the sustainability of the Essebsi regime is relatively stable (Aljazeera 2019).

Table 4. Traits in leadership trait analysis of Beji Caid Essebsi

LTA	7 Traits	Score
BACE	Belief in one's ability to control events	0.3323
PWR	Need for power and influence	0.3125
CC	Conceptual complexity	0.6120
SC	Self-confidence	0.4569
TASK	Task focus/orientation	0.6022
DIS	General distrust or suspiciousness of others	0.0438
IGB	In-group bias	0.1169

Source: Data processed from various sources using Profiler Plus

This data is the result of data processing with a plus profile that analyzes the Public appearance of Essebsi which will be used to explore the character based on the explanation in the theoretical framework through comparison with the average score of world leaders which shows scores on 7 traits as follows: "*Belief in one's ability to control events*" of Essebsi is classified as low only reaching 0.3323, on the second trait "*need for power*" his score is very high reaching 0.3125, the third trait "*Conceptual complexity*" the score is classified as high reaching 0.612, the fourth trait is "*Self-confidence*" the score is high reaching 0.4569, the fifth trait "*Task focus/orientation*" the score is low reaching only 0.6022. Trait sixth "*General distrust or suspiciousness of others*" the score is very low only reaching 0.0432,

and for the last trait “*In-group bias*” Essebsi’s score is relatively low at only 0.1169, (ProfilePlus, 2014). The explanation, analysis, and evidence of these Score 7 traits of Essebsi will be explained in depth in the next sub-discussion below.

#### KAIS SAIED’S PROFILE

Kais Saied was born in 1958 in the Nabil Province of Tunisia. He is a Professor of Law and a Tunisian politician who has served as president since 2019. He comes from a simple but intellectual family. Tunisian people, especially young people, widely supported him because they expected him to improve the political system in the country. Saied is known as an expert on constitutional law. He served as secretary general of the Tunisian Constitutional Law Association from 1990-1995 (BBC 2019). He has also been a lecturer at the University of Tunis for many years but retired in 2018. He was appointed by the Prime Minister in 2013 to become an adviser to the government in the transition to democracy (Agustina 2019).

He is a 65-year-old man who was a law professor, has no prior legal experience, and does not even have an office or party system. However, he managed to get 72% of the votes in the 2019 presidential election, mainly from the youth. Young people perceived Kais Saied as a visionary who could change Tunisia’s economic and political conditions (Sadiki 2019). His popularity has increased since there have been many demands regarding the political system, which cannot solve problems in Tunisia, especially regarding economic needs (Allahoum 2019).

Even though Saied was an independent delegate, he possessed an untarnished reputation devoid of any allegations of corruption. He could leverage his clean image to execute a strategically astute campaign. Eschewing overt promotional tactics, Saied’s approach was instead intricately woven into anti-corruption narratives, mainly targeting the demographic of young voters (Sadiki 2019).

During his performance on political comment in the media, he criticized the 2014 constitution, which always favored national political parties over individual candidates and decentralized local

government. He received much endorsement from the grassroots to become president because of his charisma and intelligence (Yahmed 2019).

Table 5. Traits in leadership trait analysis of Kais Saied

LTA	7 Traits	Score
BACE	Belief in one's ability to control events	0.3519
PWR	Need for power and influence	0.3067
CC	Conceptual complexity	0.5841
SC	Self-confidence	0.2763
TASK	Task focus/orientation	0.5911
DIS	General distrust or suspiciousness of others	0.1776
IGB	In-group bias	0.1667

Source: Data processed from various sources using Profiler Plus

The data in Table 4 is the result of data processing with a plus profile that analyzes the Public appearance of Saied, the comparison with the average score of world leaders which shows scores on 7 traits as follows: "*Belief in one's ability to control events*" Saied is classified as high score reaches 0.3519 above average, on the second trait "*need for power*" his score is high reaching 0.3067, the third trait "*Conceptual complexity*" the score is classified as low only reaching 0.5841, the fourth trait is "*Self-confidence*" the score is very low only reaching 0.2763, the fifth trait "*Task focus/orientation*" the score is low only reach 0.5911. Trait 6 "*General distrust or suspiciousness of others*" has a high score reaching 0.1776, the last trait "*In-group bias*" Saied score is quite high reaching 0.1667 (ProfilePlus, 2014). The explanation, analysis, and evidence of these Score 7 traits of Saied which will determine his characteristics will be explained in depth below.

PROFILING LEADERS IN TUNISIA THROUGH LEADER TRAITS ANALYSIS (LTA)

Comparing these two leaders from the perspective of LTA is interesting at a glance because their character is reflected in the way they make decisions and their tendencies toward democracy. The following are the results of Essebsi and Saied LTA, which are compared to the average world leaders.

Table 6. LTA Result and Comparison

LTA	Traits	Score		
		World Leaders (Average of 284 Leaders)	Essebsi	Saied
BACE	Belief in one’s ability to control events	0.35 (.05)	0.3323 <b>Below</b>	0.3519 <b>Average</b>
PWR	Need for power and influence	0.26 (.05)	0.3125 <b>High</b>	0.3067 <b>Above</b>
CC	Conceptual complexity	0.59 (.06)	0.612 <b>Above</b>	0.5841 <b>Bellow</b>
SC	Self-confidence	0.36 (.10)	0.4569 <b>Above</b>	0.2763 <b>Below</b>
TASK	Task focus/orientation	0.63 (.07)	0.6022 <b>Below</b>	0.5911 <b>Below</b>
DIS	General distrust or suspiciousness of others	0.13 (.06)	0.0432 <b>Low</b>	0.1776 <b>Above</b>
IGB	In-group bias	0.15 (.05)	0.1169 <b>Below</b>	0.1667 <b>Above</b>

Source: Data processed from various sources using Profiler Plus combined with Hermann (1993;2003) and Cuhadar et al. (2017)

Based on the data above (comparing the world’s leader average) shows a significantly different score between the two leaders in Tunisia. As explained by several literatures, (Dyson 2006; Hermann 1993;2003; Kille and Scully 2003; Cuhadar et al. 2017; Brummer

et al. 2020; Brummer 2021). there are three main aspects of leader types (traits) outputs that could be determined here. Firstly, Essebsi has a low score of BACE and a high of PWR led him to respect democracy. Secondly, he has a high score in CC and SC led him to be open to information and external support, he has a low score in TASK led him to build relationships. Lastly, he has a low score in IGB and DIS, which led him to maintain and preserve democracy.

Whereas Saied has a high score of BACE and a high score of PWR, which led him to challenge democracy, he has a low score of CC and a low score of SC, which led him to be closed to information and external support, then a low score in TASK led him in building relationships same as Essebsi. Last, he has high scores in IGB and DIS, which led him to undermine democracy.

The results of LTA in Table 5 show very clearly that characteristics influence the leadership styles of the two leaders. This research will show a broader perspective to unravel how the traits are crucial in generating decisions and tendencies, especially towards democracy, in detail as follows.

#### SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRACY IN ESSEBSI REGIME

Essebsi was the first president to be elected openly in Tunisia, so he was very influential. From the perspective of Leader Characteristics, most of his speeches, interviews, and public appearances show that he is a gentle, loving, and optimistic figure. For instance, in his public appearance at the *United Nations Institute of Peace*, He said:

“All of our life is about defending peace and I promise to enhance democracy, we need also to respect the result of the election. Tunisia is the only country where Muslims and Jews exist without any problem, we live in total harmony”

Source: Youtube, United Nations Institute of Peace, 2015

The results of the existing LTA scores show that Essebsi's leadership style is *opportunistic*. He has low *confidence in his ability to control events* and a high *need for power*, which makes him respect democracy and try to make policies to strengthen the system, such as guaranteeing rights. Fundamental rights of society (freedom of

opinion), equality between men and women, minimal military role, and focus on civil power (Risky 2022).

He had high *Conceptual complexity* and a high level of *self-confidence* score. It can be seen that he was open to information and external support, especially from the United States. Then, it created rapid democratization progress in Tunisia since Essebi was very inclusive to all constructive input, for instance, in the US-African Business Forum, and most importantly, also involved with external parties like The US and Germany that provided much support to Tunisia's democratization process in the form of financial and diplomatic aid (Millet 2021).

He also has low *task focus*, which makes him focus more on building relationships with the group or other parties. During his era, he succeeded in embracing Ghananouchi as the leader of Enahda, the Islamic party that dominates Tunisia. They finally built the grand coalition with the same perception of advancing Tunisia, even though the political direction differed somewhat between Islam and secularism (Rivera-Escartin 2022). This was the critical point of time. Sequencing in the Essebsi Era became the beginning of the success of democracy, which resulted in pro-democracy policies that caused the democracy index to begin increasing since then.

Furthermore, he echoed the strategic partnership between the government and private groups to improve the country's economic conditions and did not forget to do it democratically. He was sure Tunisia would succeed in its democratic transition with precisely democratic prices to become a good example not only neighboring but worldwide (Rivera-Escartin 2022; Sahide, Yoyo, and Muhammad 2022). This then made democracy in Tunisia relatively superior, and it managed to get a reasonably high democracy index from 2015 to 2019.

Moreover, he has a low degree of *general distrust or suspiciousness of others* and low *In-group bias*, which makes him believe that democracy is the best system to implement in Tunisia and will be beneficial for the country, and that is why he consistently highlights the value of democracy in most of his interviews. Essebsi stated:

“We liberated women, and this is very important. Tunisia is the only country where the woman is completely free and is playing her role at the same level as men at all levels of socioeconomic culture and so on, and this, of course, gives Tunisia an Impulse forward to realizing democracy”

Source: Youtube, United Nations Institute of Peace, 2015

Additionally, he also mentioned,

“We are at the time where we must now govern more and more in a democratic way, and we already hope there that the key sectors of the economy and what are the new emerging sectors and Tunisia will surely succeed in this democratic transition with precisely democratic prices will be an example not only for the Tunisians but for all the other countries of the world.”

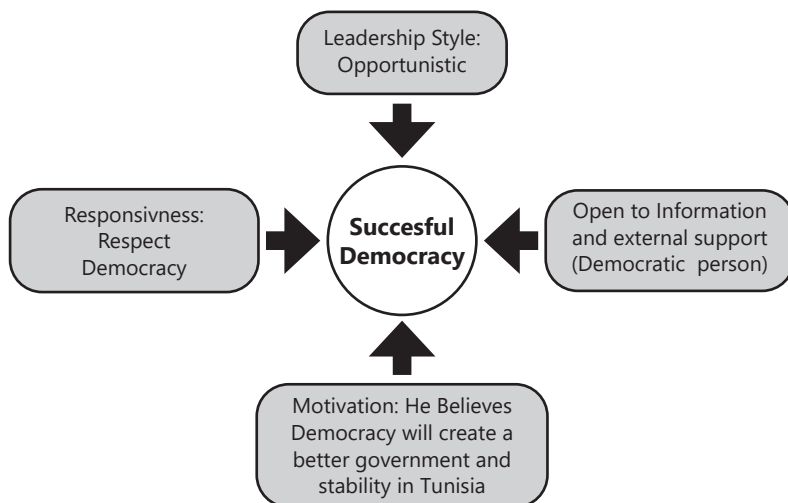
Source: YouTube. Bloomberg Philanthropies: US-African Business Forum 2016

It showed his positive tendency toward democracy. He talks a lot about women’s rights, especially about having the same important role as men in government; this was a breakthrough for MENA countries because most MENA countries still maintain their conservatism (exclusivity), which still discredits the role of women. On the other hand, Tunisia has gone far with the policies intensified during the Essebsi regime. These efforts are the reason why the index of democracy and also public satisfaction during the Essebsi era is very high (Risky 2022; Sahide, Yoyo, & Muhammad 2022).

The way he speaks shows the side of simplicity, gentleness, and pro-people, while cognitively, he was influenced by Western thought and education because he went to school in France for a long time. No wonder he had a reasonably high openness and liberalism so that in his time, secularism was entirely upheld too; this then led to democracy significantly during his leadership period even though there were still quite a lot of challenges and problems in his government (Rashid and AbuEish 2019).

The Following figure (2) simply embraces the factors that made democracy successful during Essebsi’s era based on responsiveness, motivation, and openness which resulted in a leadership style that led to democratic success in Essebsi’s Era as already explained above;

Figure 2. How Traits of Beji Caid Essebsi Affect the Successful of Democracy in Tunisia



Source: Author analysis on Tunisia Democracy Successful based on LTA

It vividly explained his leadership style as an *Opportunist* as in the figure 2 who focuses on determining what is best to do in a situation based on considerations of what is permitted in the constituency (Hermann 2003). In this case, Essebsi perceived democracy as a system that positively impacted Tunisia, so he supported it. Implementation was achieved by being open to external support, such as the US, creating policies that bolster the system, and embracing many parties to achieve harmony and implement the democratic system successfully.

#### DEMOCRACY BACKSLIDING IN KAIS SAIED REGIME

Kais Saied is the second president of Tunisia post-Arab Spring. The way he appears in public does not show his aggressiveness as a leader, as his gesture shows he has a calm demeanor although stiff, firm, religious, and also very conservative (for example, his interview on AlJazeera English (2021) “Youtube Source” and Euronews (2021) “Youtube Sources”). He showed a populist character who wanted to prioritize the interests of his people in those public appearances,

but in fact, many people were very dissatisfied with his leadership.

He was considered a conservative because he created several controversial policies regarding LGBT and equality between women and men, who should not be treated equally. Gender equality was threatened during his reign (Yerkes 2022a). He supported the death penalty in Tunisia, which has been abandoned since 1994, and demanded the distribution of inheritance according to religious teachings (Yahmed 2019).

Although most of his public appearances did not show his aggressiveness directly through his speech or gestures, his LTA scores in the substantives matter (his statements) showed that he was an *expansionist*. Looking at some of the main characters, a score in *the belief in the ability to control events* and a high score in *the need for power* was high, which made him challenge democracy by creating controversial policies such as constraints on free speech, dissolving the Parliament and creating a new constitution (government system and electoral reform) to benefit himself (Yerkes and Al-Mailam 2022).

The score in *Conceptual complexity* and *Self-confidence* was low, which made him enclosed from information and external support. Saied, with his leadership, chose not to be too close to the West, especially the US. He engaged better with traditional partners such as the Arab world, North Africa, and Mediterranean countries. Therefore, the US and several other Western countries condemned Saied because he had weakened democracy in Tunisia (Hill and Yerkes 2023; McDonough 2023). As a form of his closed nature, Saied was reluctant to have good relations with the US and rejected all forms of interference from outside the country, especially from the West. He said that only the voice of the people of Tunisia would be heard. Even though the West was concerned about the erosion of democracy, Saied firmly rejected this agenda (Reuters 2022).

Saied's score on *Task Focus* was low, just like Essebsi's, which made him more emphasis on relationships with other groups. However, Saied had a poor relationship with the parties in Tunisia because they often had different views. At the same time, he

maintained close relations with society and the military, which can be relied upon, and had closer relations with external parties such as the African Union, the European Union, and France. Tunisia had an agreement with the European Union that could provide 1 billion euros for migration projects and close relations with France (Amara 2023; Aljazeera 2023b).

His score in *general distrust or suspiciousness of others* and *In-group bias* were high, meaning he tended to be reluctant toward democracy. His distrust of political parties was a reason for discord and factionalism, especially when it came to the context of power-sharing as his motivation. He used to criticize the concept of decentralization of power in the media, including during the Essebsi Regime, because it could create imbalance and be prone to corruption cases. Therefore, when he was president, he abolished that by creating a new constitution to make him the super president with more power (Yahmed 2019).

As Lijphart (2006) argues, power-sharing was evidence that this model of democracy has an excellent opportunity to be accepted in diverse communities. Whereas in the case of Tunisia, when Saïd was in power, he was very reluctant to promote democracy, so he discredited the division of power by dissolving Parliament and even dismissing the prime minister and ultimately changing the constitution to shift Tunisia from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential system with new limits place for the executive branch in 2021. By doing so, he accumulated the power in his hands as a super-president who possessed full power. This critical point can be explained in the time sequence of what led to Tunisian democracy backsliding.

In an interview, Saïd stated:

“... I find it surprising how some people talk about a so-called coup. I followed the constitution, the conditions were met, and among these conditions were procedural terms, and all of these conditions were respected. The first decision was to freeze all of Parliament. The constitution does not allow the Parliament to be dissolved, but it does not have a way to freeze all its work. The second decision is to protect the immunity of all members of Parliament, and for those

whose cases are related, I will take care of the public prosecution ...”

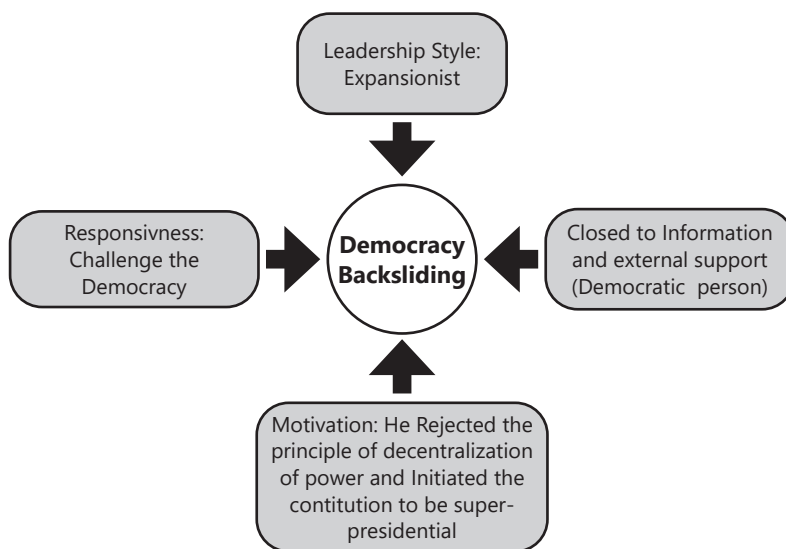
Sources: AlJazeera English 2021 Youtube

He believed that Tunisia needed a centralization of power to create a good and stable government; this political belief led him to a dictatorship and undermined the democratic system. The situation worsened during the COVID-19 outbreak, causing losses in tourism and leading to high unemployment. This failure provided an opportunity for Saied to take over the power. With the inability of the Parliament and Prime Ministers to handle the problem, Saied then decided to fire Menchchi as prime minister and suspend Parliament with emergency constitutional provisions. He invoked emergency powers and suspended the Parliament (Escalonilla 2023).

In 2021, he pushed a constitutional referendum that significantly strengthened his presidency. This new constitution reduced legislative and judicial powers and increased the authority of the president to appoint ministers and judges, which directly reduced the authority of the Parliament (Jamal 2022). He dissolved the Supreme Independent Judicial Council and permanently dissolved Parliament in 2022 using the new constitution (Yerkes 2022b). This shows Saied as a populist by seeing the people not affected by the failure of the post-revolutionary government system to overcome the crisis (Brumberg 2019). Since the beginning of his leadership, Kais Saied has been at odds with Parliament in its constitutional composition, especially in terms of disagreements over the separation of powers or the Centralisation of Authority (Allahoum 2019).

The following figure explains why democracy in Tunisia experienced a backsliding during the Essebsi era as a result of the analysis of the LTA with a combination of all the traits that have been explained;

Figure 3. How Traits of Kais Saied Created Democracy Backsliding in Tunisia



Source: Author analysis on Tunisia Democracy Backsliding based on LTA

Moreover, his leadership style was *expansionist*, as shown in Figure 3 focusing on expanding leadership, power, and how it controls the state (Hermann 2003). Saied had this character with all his actions, and the results of the LTA analysis display that he desired to maximize power aggressively. He depended on armed or security forces to accomplish his mission and interests. Power was centralized to him, thereby indirectly strengthening the role of the security forces (GSDI 2023).

Ultimately, leveraging his authority, Kais Saied facilitated the enactment of novel legislation in 2022, which delineated the procedures for legislative elections, thereby endowing him with augmented powers. This legislation granted Saied enhanced prerogatives, particularly in electoral processes, notably affording him considerable influence in the selection of parliamentary representatives, a domain in which his authority had been markedly amplified after the dissolution of the previous Parliament (Yerkes 2022b). This new electoral bill was formed to achieve his interests as super-president. The elite or incumbent attempted to retain his

power or gain more power to control the state; by doing that, Saied is genuinely trying to control Tunisia in every layer of the state (Katz 2009; Renwick 2010). It is designed to bring more losses to prospective candidates and benefit himself. Weak political parties were fatal because it meant that these parties did not have much of a role, including nominating candidates and even campaigning (Yerkes and Al-Mailam 2022).

He even prohibited opposition parties from having meetings to eliminate opposition, showing his dictatorship. He launched a systematic and sustained attack on all of Tunisia's hard-won democratic institutions (Aljazeera 2023a). Saied has intensively arrested opposition figures and prominent media who do not follow his interests. Tunisian authorities were exercising strict security against anyone who criticized the president. Saied even declared his opposition traitors who wanted to fight against the national interests (Escalonilla 2023).

Those actions showed that democracy backsliding, as stated by Borneo, Democracy in Tunisia penetrates *Executive aggrandizement*, which occurs when the elected executive weakens oversight of the executive power and makes institutional changes that hinder opposition forces from opposing executive preferences simply (Borneo 2016). What Kais Saied did during his leadership significantly threatened democracy when he dismissed parliaments, changed the constitution, and held full power with his dictatorship, which was all against democratic values. Those are also why, in 2022, the democracy index in Tunisia declined to 5.51%, classified as a hybrid regime (Statista 2023). It implicated the upcoming presidential elections this year in Tunisia, particularly whether Kais Saied will garner substantial advantages and secure re-election for the next term.

## DISCUSSION

### CROSS-LEADER ANALYSIS

Looking at the two leaders in Tunisia, it can be posited that their character shows stability in tendencies towards democracy,

especially Essebsi. His score traits and public appearance showed his consistency in upholding democracy. Meanwhile, Saied was more challenging to detect because he often showed inconsistency (sometimes rejected democracy, but sometimes claimed that he wanted to uphold democracy). Nonetheless, the tendencies shown in his actions exhibit that he has weakened democracy and led Tunisia to become a hybrid regime.

Table 7. The result of LTA on both Leaders (Essebsi and Saied) is based on 284 averages of world leaders (Combined Trait Classifications)

Leader	Types	Traits	Result	Leadership Style
Essebsi	Responsive to Democracy System	<b>Low</b> in Belief in one’s ability to control events but <b>High</b> in Need for power and influence	Respect the Democracy	Opportunist
	Openness to information and External Support	<b>High</b> Conceptual complexity and <b>High</b> Self-confidence	Open to information and external support (mainly from the West)	
	Motivation toward Democracy	<b>Low</b> General distrust or suspiciousness of others and <b>Low</b> in In-group bias	Democracy was considered the best system in Tunisia that can be beneficial for the government and society.	
Saied	Responsive to Democracy System	<b>High</b> in Belief in one’s ability to control events but <b>High</b> in Need for power and influence	Challenge the Democracy	Expansionist
	Openness to information and External Support	<b>Low</b> in Conceptual complexity and <b>Low</b> Self-confidence	Closed to information and external support, (particularly from the West (US))	
	Motivation toward Democracy	<b>High</b> in Conceptual complexity and <b>High</b> Self-confidence	Rejected the principle of decentralization of power and Initiated the decision to be super-presidential.	

The LTA scores of these two leaders show significant differences, which led to different outputs. The results of Essebsi's scores show that his personality respects democracy, he is more open to information and international support, and he is motivated by the advantages of democracy, which makes him opportunistic. He focused on determining what is best to do in a situation based on considerations of what was permitted in the constituency (Hermann 2003; Cuhadar 2017). Essebsi sees democracy as a system that positively impacts Tunisia's development, so he enthusiastically supports and highlights it every time in the media. Meanwhile, Saied's personality types challenged democracy, which is close to information and international support. They were motivated by reluctance toward the principle of power-sharing, making him an Expansionist who focused on expanding leadership and power and controlling the state with a dictatorship that created democratic backsliding. It showed that the primary assumption of this research was proven by showing the existing LTA scores and how the two leaders' policies are inversely proportional and cause Tunisian democratic dynamics.

However, the "*Need for power*" trait shows Essebsi's score was higher than Saied's. Because of his decades of superiority in Tunisia politics and his strong secular tradition, he has the ambition to win the election in his old age. Saied leveraged word choice, creating good personal branding in the media. However, his score is also determined to be high since his policies showed a more significant "*need for power*" by trying to maximize his power.

## CONCLUSION

Tunisia has experienced many political upheavals that have made conditions very unstable. Comparing the conditions of Tunisia in Essebsi and Saied Regime shows that political conditions were much more stable during Essebsi's leadership, with high levels of democracy and public satisfaction. Unlike Saied, who tried to take complete control of the country through various actions, Saied was initially a populist, then changed to a demagogue for undermining democracy.

The actions taken by these two leaders were influenced by their traits and cognitive abilities. Leaders Traits Analysis shows that Essebsi is opportunistic and tends to develop democracy, while Saied is an expansionist who tends to have full power, thereby weakening the implementation of democracy. The findings about leadership traits that produce political beliefs are very influential in the functioning of a government system.

The essence of this research has shown that the character and political beliefs that influence leaders' tendencies are fundamental and influential in the functioning of a state system, as in Tunisia. Every country in the world has an excellent opportunity to implement good democratic performance if it is led by a leader who is also respected or pro-democracy like Essebsi.

Until now, Tunisia's condition is still characterized by tension between the presidential power, which is centered on it, and various oppositions in society. The following general election will answer whether Tunisia will continue entangled in the current abstract system or will get a brighter future with its political system. The results of this study could be the beginning of a new approach to looking at changes in political trajectories by focusing on the Leader's traits that make it possible to point out other factors that influence a country's policy or political direction, particularly in MENA countries.

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