

# As more young Tunisians look away from politics, many wish to live abroad

Tunis (AFP) – At a cafe in Tunis’s bustling Bab Souika, a group of young men lean over sports betting slips. With presidential elections just days ahead, they are instead focused on Champions League scores – a sign of common indifference in a country many wish to leave.

Mohamed, a 22-year-old who chose not to give his full name for fear of “imprisonment”, told AFP that he and his friends were not going to vote because it was “useless”.

“We have nothing to do with politics,” he said. “We try to live our lives day by day. It doesn’t concern us.”

About a third of the nearly 10 million Tunisians set to cast their ballots Sunday are under 35, according to official figures.

Yet the election appears to have created a mood of resignation among young people, most of whom would rather leave the country, according to a recent study.

Published by the Arab Barometer in August, the study found that seven out of 10 Tunisians aged between 18 and 29 wished to emigrate.

Tunisia now leads Arab nations measured by the desire to migrate, it said, with an estimated 46 percent of the whole population wanting to live abroad.

“If you provide three boats right now, no one here will stay,” Mohamed added, looking around him at the busy cafe.

# 'Hard to consider a future'



Tunisia's faltering economy, with high inflation and unemployment, is driving many people to try to reach Europe © FETHI BELAID / AFP

Each year, thousands of Tunisians, mainly young men, attempt to make the perilous sea crossing to Europe in search of a better life.

Others try to do it by overstaying tourist visas or through study-abroad programmes.

The Arab Barometer said the new figures contrasted with the 22-percent rate it had recorded in Tunisia overall in 2011.

That year, a revolution – which later swept through the region – ousted longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and sparked hope among young people.

But over a decade later, they are faced with dimmed prospects,

grappling with a stagnant economy, soaring unemployment, and dwindling rights.

Official figures show 41 percent of young Tunisians are unemployed – even as 23 percent of them hold university degrees.

Ghaith, a high-schooler who also chose not to provide his last name for fear of retribution, said he was thinking about leaving too.

“I’m only 17, and when I see older people who haven’t done anything with their lives, I ask myself: what will I do?” he said.

Next to him, his 19-year-old friend, also named Mohamed, said he wanted to learn German and move to Berlin, but that it was too expensive.

“This country has let us down,” he told AFP. “It’s become hard to consider a future.”

If none of the youngsters interviewed by AFP wished to disclose their last names, it was because authorities have stepped up cracking down on dissent.

## **‘Patterns from past’**

President Kais Saied, who made a sweeping power grab in 2021, is seeking a second term in Sunday's elections © FETHI BELAID / AFP/File

Saied was democratically elected in 2019 but orchestrated a sweeping power grab two years later, enshrining what many see as one-man rule.

New York-based Human Rights Watch recently said that more than "170 people are detained in Tunisia on political grounds or for exercising their fundamental rights".

A number of his critics have been prosecuted under Decree 54,

a law he enacted in 2022 to combat “false news”.

Slim, a 31-year-old gig worker who also chose not to give his full name out of fear, said he hasn’t “gained anything” under Saied.

“I like him,” he said. “He fought corruption, but I didn’t personally benefit from it.”

“What’s in it for me if I still can’t find eggs, milk, coffee and other necessities?” he added.

“We’re tired, seriously,” he pleaded. “Why do you think people keep leaving the country? They take to the sea knowing they might die.”

This week, 15 Tunisians were found dead after their boat capsized as two boats bearing dozens were intercepted.

Some, however, choose to stay.

At a recent protest near the parliament in Tunis, Souhaieb Ferchichi, a 30-year-old activist, called for boycotting the election which rights groups have said wasn’t fair.

Many of Saied’s challengers have been barred from running, with some even jailed.

Salma Ezzine, a 25-year-old protester and doctor, said Tunisia was “noticing patterns from the past”.

“This is how dictatorships are born,” she said.

Unlike more than 1,000 doctors who left Tunisia last year according to labour figures, Ezzine said she has to stay and chip into bettering the country.

“Leaving the country can be a short-term solution,” she said. “But people need to realise that it adds to the problem. If no one stays, who is going to make the change?”

