

NEGOTIATING TUNISIA'S AFRICANNESS: A DIALOGICAL NETWORK STUDY OF KAIS SAIED'S SPEECH AND THE CONTROVERSY OVER SUB- SAHARAN MIGRANTS

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Abstract:

This study analyzes Tunisian President Kais Saied's speech to the National Security Council concerning Sub-Saharan African immigrants, the responses from Amnesty International and the African Union, and his joint statement with Guinea-Bissau's President Umaro Sissoco Embaló. Using Dialogical Networks and structured immediacy, it traces how discourse on immigration policy circulates across media conferences, press releases, and social platforms. The analysis reveals that Saied framed migration as a national threat, reinforcing anti-Black prejudice and scapegoating human rights groups to justify restrictive policies. While later rhetoric affirmed Tunisia's African identity, his distinction between "Africans" and North Africans exposed an exclusionary stance embedded in pan-African language. This contradiction highlights how authoritarian rule legitimizes itself by directing discourse against immigration, normalizing prejudice, and stifling dissent.

Keywords: immigration policy, dialogical network, discourse analysis, geopolitics

1. Introduction

In the past few years, European Union and its member states have tightened border control in an effort to prevent the illegal immigration, especially Sub-Saharan refugees who attempt to cross the mediterranean sea and arrive on the shores of Spain and Italy. The obstacles EU set up for refugees and the increasing number of refugees who lost their lives along the ways caused backlash in European society and the harsh criticism from many human right agencies (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Despite these outcry for the humanitarian crisis caused by the law execution of the EU border control guard, the EU chose to further restrict the illegal immigration flow from Sub-Saharan region by enhancing the collaboration with North African countries including Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia as the Maghreb provides the gateway for the refugees from Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Mali among many other African countries to reach Europe (European Commission, 2022). The willingness of the Maghreb countries' in the cooperation deal, however, comes at a cost. In July 2023, the European Union and Tunisian government has signed an agreement on a programme worth 150 million euros to improve the financial condition and migration control capability of the latter(European Commission, 2023).

But this financial support, as pointed out by Lorenzo Ghione, has helped to legitimize the increasingly authoritarian rule of the Kais Saied regime (Ghione, 2024). The law-professor-turned Tunisian president has tightened his control on society and reversed the democratization trend of Tunisia by dismissing the parliament in 2021 and arresting opposition figures (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The brutal approaches adopted by him in crushing disobedience bear a striking resemblance to his pre-revolution predecessor Ben Ali (Wolf, 2023).

To justify the tightening immigration policy and the ensuing brutal treatment of Sub-Saharan refugees in public discourse, the President delivered a speech on 21st February 2023 before the National Security Council, accusing the African migrants of attempting to change the demography of the Arabic country (Reuters, 2023). This speech was condemned soon by multiple human right NGOs as blatant racism and their criticisms were again responded to by the President personally during the press conference in a meeting with the President of Guinea-Bissau on March 8th 2023, dismissing the accusation of racism.

This article would analyze the speeches of President Kais Saied and the responses of various human rights groups including Amnesty and International Federation for Human Rights using the theory of Dialogical networks (DNs), which is defined as “sequentially-organised communications which supervene on face-to-face interactions” (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2022). DNs is further described as “spatio-temporally distributed, and the parts of sequences are multiplied in that they consist of similar contributions by different participants”. By adopting this analyzing framework, the research aims to reveal how different speeches and responses delivered at various occasions and through different media channels, either traditional mass media or social media, are interconnected. It would further manifest how the Tunisian president made references to the past to justify future actions targeting African immigrants and the responses from human right NGOs rebuked the racist speech.

2. Literature Review

Dialogical Networks (DNs)

In a research conducted by Leudar and Nekvapil (2002), they analyze the public discussion surrounding the immigration of Romanies into the Czech Republic following the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1989. Taking place in the context of the new immigration law introduced in 1993, five pieces of newspaper articles published in Czech national dailies, a transcribed TV debate by Czech TV program 1 along with a recorded private conversation on the issue are selected in the DN analysis. The study demonstrates how different participants in the Dialogical Networks used various methods and resources to present the law as justified policy-making or prejudicial discrimination against Romanies. Apart from its usage in scrutinizing jurisprudential debate in public discourse, DNs can also be applied in the study of economic section. In the research of Leudar et al. (2018), DNs is employed to investigate how the currency devaluation decision made by the Czech National Bank (CNB) was communicated to the public. It is also found that the reuse of previous contributions is an emergent and important property of the DNs as the transparency of CNB was accomplished through the public announcement of its intervention practice along with the report and interpretation of financial journalists.

In Leudar and Nekvapil (2011), the research investigates how members of DNs as “practical historians” make history “relevant and consequential”. They analyze the political

discourse following the 9/11 terrorism attack in the U.S. and find two related methods. One is to place the contemporary events in relation to historical events and the other is to “constrain historical understanding of the contemporary events in the future”. They also introduce the concept of “structured immediacy” into the analysis as to contextualize the immediate settings of talk for meaning-making.

3. Methodology

This research adopts an ethnography approach in analyzing the materials and qualitatively examine them. This study uses the concept of “structured immediacy” to explore how the past is produced as consequential history in their local activities. In particular, it delves into the argumentation taking place between the Tunisian president’s speech on immigration before the National Security Council and the ensuing denunciation announced by Amnesty and African Union. It also includes the later response made by President Kais Saied and his Guinée-Bissau counterpart in a joint press conference.

4. Analysis

Excerpt 1 The Kais Saied speech before National Security Council on 21st February 2023, posted on the Facebook account of Tunisian President

(<https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/posts/pfbid02gTULf64cPWA1eLmU19HZoDSyFi7JmfCwBYR42FLN2YWmkkGdPcRDanjovMTygUSJI>)

1 President of the Republic Kais Saied chaired, on the afternoon of Tuesday, February 21, 2023, at the Carthage Palace, a meeting of the National Security Council, devoted to urgent measures to be taken to address the phenomenon of the large influx of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa into Tunisia.

2 The President emphasized that this situation is unnatural, pointing out that **a criminal arrangement had been prepared since the beginning of this century to alter Tunisia’s demographic composition.** He claimed that certain parties received large sums of money **after 2011** to facilitate the settlement of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Tunisia. He alleged that the unspoken objective of these successive waves of irregular migration is to **portray Tunisia solely as an African country, with no affiliation to the Arab and Islamic worlds.**

3 President Saied stated that Tunisia takes pride in its African identity, as it is one of the **founding countries of the Organization of African Unity and has supported many peoples in their struggles for liberation and independence.** He reiterated Tunisia’s call for **Africa to belong to Africans**, so that African peoples may be freed from decades of suffering due to wars and famines.

4 The President stressed the need to put an immediate stop to this phenomenon, especially **given that the influx of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa continues, bringing with it violence, crimes, and unacceptable practices, in addition to being legally punishable.**

5 The Head of State called for action on all fronts — diplomatic, security, and military — as well as the strict enforcement of laws concerning foreigners' residency status in Tunisia and illegal border crossings.

6 President Saied concluded by stating that those behind this phenomenon are **trafficking in human beings, all while claiming to defend human rights.**

In this speech the president was addressing the rapidly increasing number of Sub-Saharan immigrants to the country. As pointed out by Ghione(2024), the rhetoric of “immigrants changing the Tunisia’s demographic composition” is a readapted version of Renaud Camus’s replacement theory which is a conspiracy of white population in Europe being replaced by non-white, especially from Muslim countries. In borrowing this conspiracy theory, the president was suggesting the superiority of Tunisians over Sub-Saharan Africans(SSAs). He also associated these immigrants with characteristics of high criminality and violence, thus tarnishing the image of the Sub-Saharan Africans. Moreover, this act of treating SSAs as a monolithic group with no regard to the inherent diversity of ethnicities, nationalities and educational backgrounds could further exacerbate the already existing prejudice against SSAs in Tunisian society(Parikh, 2021). His another claim of potential disconnection of Tunisia from Arabic world and Muslim caused by the increasing flow of SSAs failed to acknowledge the robustness of Islam in Sub-Sahara Africa and historicize the interconnection between Arabic world and Africa south of Sahara(Østebø, 2021).

But the SSAs inhabiting in Tunisia was not the only target of the Tunisian presidential speech. In mentioning “criminal arrangement” and “certain parties receiving large sums of money after 2011 in facilitating the settlement”, he was referring to the human rights group providing assistance to SSAs in Tunisia(Amnesty International, 2025). He also situated the massive inflow of refugees to the history of 2011 as a starting point without contextualizing it by the regional turbulence and rather scapegoated the humanitarian groups that aid the displaced people for reasons of their acceptance of funding from foreign governments.

Appearing to have expected the accusation of racism, he made an effort to deflect it by situating the history between Tunisia and Sub-Sahara Africa to their collaborative relationship in African emancipation from colonialism and the establishment of African Union.

To sum up, through the analysis above, it is clear that the Tunisia President made the justification of tightening immigration control while avoiding the racism accusation through obscuring the diversity of SSAs, scapegoating the human rights agencies but historicizing the involvement of Tunisia in supporting African independence.

Excerpt 2 The speech of Heba Morayef, Amnesty International’s Director for the Middle East and North Africa, on 10th March 2023

(https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/?utm_source=TWITTER-

[IS&utm_medium=social&utm_content=9135834133&utm_campaign=Amnesty&utm_term=-Yes](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/?utm_source=TWITTER-IS&utm_medium=social&utm_content=9135834133&utm_campaign=Amnesty&utm_term=-Yes))

1“President Saied must retract his comments and order investigations to clearly signal that **anti-Black racist violence** will not be tolerated. **The president must stop finding scapegoats for Tunisia’s economic and political woes.** The community of Black African migrants in Tunisia is now gripped by fear of assault or being arbitrarily arrested and summarily deported,” said Heba Morayef, Amnesty International’s Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

2“So far, the Tunisian authorities have sought to downplay these violent attacks and even deny them altogether. Authorities should prioritize the investigation of

incidents of police violence against Black migrants, put an immediate end to forcible returns currently underway and prevent any further racially motivated attacks by gangs or state agents.”

In the comment on the Tunisian Presidential speech, Heba Morayef, Amnesty International’s Director for the Middle East and North Africa contextualized the President Saied’s confrontational remarks on SSAs and human rights agencies in the setting of the deteriorating economic conditions and the rising opposition voices.

His unequivocal description of the contemporary discrimination against “Black” people also set the comment apart from Tunisian President’s self-contradict recognition of Tunisia’s membership in Africa. The unspoken racial superiority in the speech of Tunisian president was laid bare here in the judgement made by Morayef.

Excerpt 3 Press release of African Union on 24th February 2023

(https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/?utm_source=TWITTER-IS&utm_medium=social&utm_content=9135834133&utm_campaign=Amnesty&utm_term=-Yes)

The Chairperson of the African Union Commission strongly condemns the racial statements on fellow Africans in Tunisia.

The Chairperson of the African Union Commission H.E. Moussa Faki MAHAMAT strongly condemns the shocking statement issued by Tunisian authorities targeting fellow Africans which go against the letter and spirit of our Organization and founding principles.

On behalf of the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson Dr Monique Nsanzabaganwa and the AU Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, Amb Minata Samate, received the Permanent Representative of Tunisia accredited to the African Union for urgent consultations to register the African Union’s deep shock and concern at the form and substance of the statement targeting fellow Africans, notwithstanding their legal status in the country.

The Chairperson reminds all countries, particularly African Union Member States, to honor their obligations under international law and relevant African Union instruments to treat all migrants with dignity, wherever they come from, refrain from racialised hate speech that could bring people to harm, and prioritize their safety and human rights.

The Chairperson reiterates the commitment of the Commission to support the authorities in Tunisia in addressing migration challenges in order to make migration safe, dignified and regular.

Here in the statement from the African Union, it has also situated “shocking statement of the Tunisian authorities” in the violation of “founding principles” of the organization, likely to question the Tunisian president’s own act of tracing the Cross-Sahara relationship to the independence age and its role as a founding nation of African Union.

Excerpt 4 Joint press conference speech of President of Guinée-Bissau and President of Tunisia on 8th March 2023

(<https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/pr%C3%A9sident-de-la-guin%C3%A9e-bissau-les-propos-2831>)

de-ka%C3%AFs-sa%C3%AFed-sur-les-subsahariens-ont-%C3%A9t%C3%A9-mal-interpr%C3%A9t%C3%A9s/2840638)

For the full video, see

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpvsvs3xh2E&ab_channel=ActuTV

1Guinea-Bissau President Umaro Sissoco Embaló said Wednesday that his Tunisian counterpart, Kaïs Saïed,'s statements regarding sub-Saharan Africans **had been "misinterpreted."**

2This is the conclusion of a video released by the Tunisian presidency following a meeting at the Carthage Palace between Saïed and Embaló, who is also the current chairman of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States).

3For Embaló, it is unthinkable that "**Tunisia, the country of former President Habib Bourguiba, could be a racist country,**" describing the outcry sparked by President Kaïs Saïed's statements as a "misinterpretation."

4He continued, addressing President Saïed: "We are all Africans. **You yourself are African, regardless of the color of your skin... We are all brothers.**"

5The Guinea-Bissau president emphasized that "things must not be misinterpreted... and there are those who take advantage of these interpretations."

6For his part, Saïed emphasized that "what cannot be accepted is the interpretation of statements in a way that does not serve Tunisia's image, but rather harms it."

7"We say to those who want to harm Tunisia that you are mistaken," he continued.

8Saïed added: "**I am African and proud of it, and all Africans are brothers,**" **rejecting "the accusation of racism against Tunisia."**

In his speech, Guinea-Bissau President Umaro Sissoco Embaló contextualized the current Tunisian President's remarks within the legacy of Habib Bourguiba, highlighting the founding father's role in the decolonization struggle, advancement of women's rights, and improvement of national literacy—efforts that served as a model for other African nations. In the speech of Guinea-Bissau President Umaro Sissoco Embaló, this progressive image associated with Bourguiba was transferred to the current President Kais Saïed in rebuttal of racist accusation.

In the same venue, the Tunisian President also made efforts to stress the Pan-African brotherhood between himself and black friends personally and Tunisia and other African countries on the national level. This reference to Pan-Africanism thus historicizes the cross-Saharan relationship in a positive light and sets aside the longstanding racial prejudices in Tunisia.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study scrutinizes the the speech made by Tunisian President Kais Saïed before the National Security Council on 21st February 2023, the responses from Amnesty International and the African Union, and the Joint Speech made by Guinea-Bissau President Umaro Sissoco Embaló and his Tunisian counterpart. Dialogical Networks(DNs) and the related concept of structured immediacy are employed in the analysis.

The Dialogical Networks are defined as sequentially-organised communications which supervene on face-to-face interactions"(Leudar and Nekvapil, 2022). They are spatio-temporally distributed, and the parts of sequences are multiplied in that they consist of similar contributions by different participants. The research has manifested that the

participation into the networks are realized through various channels, which include social media posts, press release and media conference. The structured immediacy concept adopted in the analysis focuses on “how people make the past formulated as a history consequential in their local activities and produce it through those activities.” This research hence contextualizes the discourse analysis and reveals that the Tunisian President speech heightened the longstanding racial prejudices against SSAs in Tunisian society and scapegoating human right groups in the immigration crisis. In the subsequent responses from Amnesty and the African Union and his refutation in the press conference, the historicization of Tunisian membership in Africa become a focal point. Although the president acknowledged Tunisia’s African identity, his use of the term “Africans” in reference to sub-Saharan populations revealed a pragmatic distinction that excluded North Africa, suggesting an underlying discourse of otherness within the pan-African label.

This inherent self-contradiction and pretense help consolidate authoritarian rule by constructing authority not on rational legitimacy but on undemocratic governance and the enforced public acceptance of its discourse, discouraging critical thinking and dissent.

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