Strangling Tunisia's democracy

What is the issue?

- The referendum results on the amendments to the National Constitution proposed by Tunisian President Mr. Kais Saied were formally endorsed by the Election Commission.
- It effectively terminates the country's brief encounter with a democratic order.



How Presidential coup happened in Tunisia?

- Mr. Kais Saied, who was a constitutional expert with no party or political affiliations, came to power in 2019.
- He began to express disdain for his country's political class, and refused to interact with political parties and civil society groups.
- He criticized the constitutional locks that prevented him from effecting the economic reforms that were urgently needed.
- In December 2021, Mr. Saied announced a road map for political change to propose amendments to the constitution.
- In early-2022, he dissolved the parliament, dismissed the prime minister, and deprived the assembly members of their immunity.
- Then, he finally affected a "coup" against the very constitution that had empowered him, and the members of parliament attempting to enter the assembly were blocked by the armed forces.
- The presidential coup initially enjoyed considerable popular support, as the assembly was deeply divided by diverse political groups, which made it impossible to bring about reforms the country needed.

What are the economic challenges in the meanwhile?

- Tunisia slid deeper into an economic malaise: inflation reached 8%, while unemployment was 16%, reaching 40% among the youth.
- As the currency depreciated by 60% and purchasing power fell by 40%, Tunisia's credit rating was downgraded to 'CCC'.
- Following the war in Ukraine, as wheat supplies from Russia and Ukraine got disrupted and prices shot up.
- Mr. Saied initiated a dialogue with the IMF to obtain $4 billion for economic support.
- But, the IMF insisted on a sharp reduction in subsidies on goods and services, a freeze on public sector wages, and privatisation of public sector companies.
- These conditions alienated the Tunisian General Labour Union, the country's powerful trade union from the President.

What is the role of UGTT?

- The UGTT had played a major role in the Arab Spring uprisings that had ousted President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011.
- It had then facilitated national reconciliation among feuding politicians that led to the nationally accepted constitution of 2015.
- It was seen as an achievement that led to the UGTT joining three other Tunisian groups in winning the Nobel Peace Prize that year.
- In 2021, the UGTT initially backed Mr. Saied's initiatives to strengthen the presidency but became a sharp critic after the deteriorating economic conditions and the President's misguided focus on constitutional changes.
- It called a general strike to protest the economic situation and the conditions being proposed by the IMF for its loan.
- With its one million members in a country of 12 million, the UGTT is a formidable opponent.

Why the new amendments were opposed?

- The constitutional amendments to obtain a new republic were prepared by an advisory committee appointed by the President.
- The foremost purpose of the committee is to strengthen the president by removing all constraints on the exercise of untrammeled power by him.
- It was reported that the amendments provided for an unbridled presidential system, with an omnipotent president, a powerless parliament, and a toothless judiciary.

What are the possible options?

- For several months, American senators and congressmen have called on the US President Joe Biden to pressurise Mr. Saied to prevent the political backslide.
- Despite Mr. Biden's commitment to promote democracy globally, no magic formula has emerged to correct the situation.
- The instrument of cutting off military or economic aid was seen as an ineffective step, because the Tunisian armed forces are major U.S. allies and central to the fight against extremist forces.
- Reduced economic assistance would make the Tunisians' living conditions more miserable.
- Mr. Saied has the option to turn to Saudi Arabia and the UAE for political and economic support.
- Both of them are believed to have backed Mr. Saied's constitutional coup in order to subvert the Islamist Ennahda as a political player in Tunisia.

What the Tunisian tussle has exposed?

- The Tunisian experience has exposed the daunting challenges in achieving political and economic change after an authoritarian order has been overthrown.
- Crony capitalism has remained in place and works closely with politicians.
- External players are of no help -
    - The U.S. has neither interest in nor the capacity to promote democracy in

Tunisia.
    - Saudi Arabia and the UAE works tirelessly to overturn the democratic order that provides a place for political Islam.
- The IMF remains committed to policy approaches that indicate little sensitivity towards the hardships the people are going through.

