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Exploring Conspiracist Populism in Power: The Case of Kais Saied in Tunisia

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to conduct a literature review of the existing nexus between conspiracy theories and populist politics. Most of the literature considering the political nature of conspiracy theories has focused mainly on individual action and electoral choices, hence setting aside the agency of political leaders that deliberately resort to these tales to mobilise supporters. On the contrary, conspiracy theories are increasingly moving away from extremist politics to enter the institutional political arena and become part and parcel of the political narratives and strategies of institutional figures. Against this backdrop, the present work offers a new approach to investigate the connection between populist conspiracy theories and conspiracist populism and attempts to explain how conspiracist populism works and what its potential impact on contemporary democracies is. The analysis of the literature offers some theoretical insights to explore the specific case of the presidency of Kais Saied in Tunisia, which has been labelled as a form of constitutional populism integrating conspiracy theories. The inquiry on the Tunisian case demonstrates that conspiracy theories can represent both tactics and framings for populists in power, and, if democratic checks and balances are weak enough, they can lead to the erosion of democracy itself.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; conspiracist populism; Tunisia; Kais Saied; government; power



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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, conspiracy theories (CTs) have turned into a daily expression and obtained growing attention. As in every period of crisis, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent psychological and socio-economic distress contributed to the growth of new conspiracy theories offering simple solutions to complex issues (Douglas 2021). In some cases, CTs have also been instrumentalised by populist leaders to incite violent insurrections: the January 6 attack on Capitol Hill, for instance, was the result of the call to action of the former U.S. President Donald Trump, falsely claiming an electoral fraud in 2020 presidential elections. Interestingly enough, conspiracy theories seem to have also become recurring features and frames in mainstream politics, especially among populist parties.

Conspiracy theories and populism seem to share a number of core features whose connection is still underexplored. Most notably, the main common denominator to these two concepts is the dichotomic paradigm through which they understand society and politics, and that is fundamentally based on the core opposition between an ingroup—the people or the virtuous community—and an outgroup—namely, the corrupted élite or, broadly speaking, the Other (Bergmann 2018). Moreover, the totalising and immersive dimension of conspiracy thinking, leading people to see secret plots everywhere and distrust anyone, closely resembles the way populists engage supporters by creating a sense of urgent and impending threat to people (Moffitt 2015; Urbinati 2022).

The increasing exploitation of conspiracy beliefs by populists in power sheds light on the mutual strength they might draw from each other. On the one hand, promoting conspiracy thinking seems to reinforce the populist power struggle, while on the other,

the institutionalisation of conspiracy theories of any kind might facilitate their spread in society and politics and transform them into legitimate tools in the political arena.

Besides widely investigated political contexts, such as the American one after the political rise of Donald Trump (Bergmann and Butter 2020; Pirro and Taggart 2023), some cases exemplifying forms of presidential populist conspiracism have also emerged in the Mediterranean area. Since his election in 2019, the President of the Tunisian Republic, Kais Saied—a homo novus of Tunisian politics that merges technocratic and genuinely populist aspects (Annovi 2022)—has adopted an increasingly conspiracist rhetoric, going as far as to back Great Replacement-related conspiracy theories to justify the mismanagement of migration flows in February 2023 (Cordall 2023).

Moreover, the case of the Tunisian president does not only allow us to investigate how conspiracist populism in power works and how conspiracy theories can serve the goals of populist actors. Instead, it provides a distinct example of what happens when populists neatly step outside the pluralistic democratic arena and succeed in creating new forms of regimes. Against this backdrop, what role do conspiracy theories play in Saied's distinctive presidential populism? How can they represent both valid communicative tools and political tactics to conspiracist populism, and, more importantly, what are their consequences?

The aim of this paper is, hence, to retrace the academic international debate over conspiracist populism and populist conspiracy theories to create an original theoretical framework. Therefore, this paper is composed of four main parts. The first chapter delves into the academic debate on the nexus between populism and conspiracy theories. More specifically, this part considers the theoretical literature produced so far regarding the nexus between populism and conspiracy theories. The second chapter is devoted to the in-depth analysis of the functioning of populist conspiracy theories, while the third considers the potential detrimental effects it might have. Finally, the fourth part makes some considerations on how this theoretical framework can be applied to the Tunisian case.¹

2. Populism and Conspiracy Theories

The concepts of conspiracy theories and populism have produced a significant amount of the literature over the last decades. However, although conspiracy theories are increasingly moving out from extremist politics to enter the institutional political arena, the research on how CTs can be politicised and institutionalised by populists is still at its beginnings (Bergmann 2018; Bergmann and Butter 2020; Pirro and Taggart 2023).

Analysing these two concepts comparatively allows us to highlight some specific characteristics thereof that might elude an approach based on a single perspective. On the one hand, considering conspiracy theories as potential tools for populists in power sheds light on the protean nature of contemporary populism (Manucci 2022), a phenomenon that changes according to the time and context in which it evolves. On the other hand, this cross-analysis emphasises that conspiracy theories are not simple morality tales “that produce vicious circles of internally consistent explanations and analogies” (Farinelli 2021, p. 5). On the contrary, when entering the political arena, they can turn into hegemonic and systemic political worldviews (Giry and Tika 2020) serving the communication as well as the mode of governance of populists. Against this backdrop, the first section provides a literature review of the concepts of conspiracy theories and populism and offers a new theoretical framework to understand and operationalise them.

2.1. Unpacking Conspiracy Theories

The first concept requiring attention is that of conspiracy theory—and, specifically, of populist conspiracy theory. From a sociological perspective, the concept is still debated, and the academia has produced various definitions thereof (Bronner 2015; Renard 2015; Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020). The difficulty in finding a shared conceptualisation speaks volumes about the complexity of labelling a contested and value-charged concept. However, the set of axioms elaborated by Barkun (2003) seems to encapsulate properly the core

functioning of a conspiracy theory, hence conceiving the conviction that (1) nothing happens by chance, (2) nothing is what it seems, and (3) everything is connected. These three simple statements synthesising how conspiracy thinking works also point out the two main resulting features of conspiracy theories.

Firstly, these remarks sound like an attempt to make sense of a chaotic world through simple answers that cast doubts on traditional knowledge and institutions and invite them to dig deeper to know the truth (Barkun 2013). Indeed, as claimed by Harambam (2020), one of the core features of CT is challenging mainstream authorities and scientific thinking with alternative explanatory narratives that help face epistemic uncertainty. In this sense, conspiracy theories can be seen as epistemic, as they are the expression of a genuine human desire to understand the world (Bergmann 2018, p. 61; Baden and Sharon 2021). Secondly, conspiracy theories result in being essentially monistic, hence based on the assumption that unintentionality and chance do not exist, and that every action is determined by a conscious secret plan (Pirro and Taggart 2023). As Douglas and Sutton (2018) pointed out, conspiracy theories are grounded in a perception of agency, even where none exists, and assume that if the intentionality behind actions, events, or phenomena is not evident, it is because those behind them strategically maintain secrecy. Therefore, by claiming that everything must be connected, conspiracy theories seem to be not only a fear or a denunciation but, in certain cases, also hegemonic and systemic worldviews in which the idea of a conspiracy is omnipresent, yet unverifiable (Giry and Tika 2020; Bergmann and Butter 2020).

Considering Barkun's conceptualisation and the analyses that resulted from it helps us understand what a populist conspiracy theory is. Indeed, starting from the assumption that secrecy and conspiracy are core features of society and politics, it is possible to define a populist conspiracy theory as a theory of power (Fenster 1999), a dogmatic form of politicisation opposing "the people" to a more or less secret power bloc (or the "élite") that is plotting for their own benefit against the common good (Giry and Tika 2020; Uscinski and Parent 2014). In this Manichean perspective, the people are, hence, perceived as the inherently virtuous community (Pirro and Taggart 2023), while the élite is usually framed as the ultimate enemy and coincides with institutions, scientific bodies, and, broadly speaking, the Other.

Three considerations regarding a potential nexus between CT and populism can be made on the basis of these insights. The conspiracist monistic worldviews and circular reasoning facilitate a ripple effect: someone who believes in one CT is likely to believe in another as long as it confirms and bolsters the previous one (Bergmann 2018; Wood et al. 2012). In this sense, the understanding of politics might work as a monological belief system—intended as a coherent narrative enriched and reinforced by a sum of individual beliefs—as much as political ideologies do (Goertzel 1994; Castanho Silva et al. 2017). This observation suggests that conspiracy theories might have an ideological dimension that is basically grounded in the demonisation of the Other. Another interesting insight is provided by Fenster, who first proposed the concept of CT as theories of power (1999). Starting from the assumption that populism must produce specific identities to stay in the political game and secure consensus, it turns out that conspiracy theories can play a fundamental role as communicative tools (p. 90), as their content, reception, and texts can both create political enemies and contribute to constructing identities (Moffitt 2015). Indeed, as maintained by van Prooijen and van Lange, "most conspiracy beliefs can be framed in terms of beliefs about how a powerful and evil outgroup meets in secret, designing a plot that is harmful to one's ingroup" (Van Prooijen and Van Lange 2014, pp. 238–39). Therefore, the underlying intergroup dimension of conspiracy theories can be a fundamental asset for populism to create positive ingroup identity and negative outgroup perceptions (Cichocka et al. 2016). Finally, the inherent power asymmetry between the people and the élite is the backbone of conspiracy theories, as it serves three fundamental scopes: it strengthens a victimhood frame of the people, perceived as the virtuous and authentic group in open conflict with the powerful elite (Castanho Silva et al. 2017); it feeds on the distrust towards the status quo (Hameleers 2021, p. 4); and it creates a sense of systemic and perennial crisis, which is fundamental to the appealing of the conspiracy theory itself.

2.2. Deconstructing Conspiracist Populism

The literature on populism has flourished over the last three decades, given the increasing importance of populist politics in various geographical areas (see [Moffitt 2016](#)). At the same time, despite the vast amount of work that has been produced, populism-related research still suffers from the absence of a shared definition of the phenomenon, and the diverse approaches that have been elaborated so far can make the investigation more complex ([Anselmi 2017](#)). Therefore, before delving into the discussion of what conspiracist populism is, a brief overview of which approach is useful—and will be used—in this case is deemed necessary.

Broadly speaking, two different approaches have been extensively used to investigate this phenomenon: the discursive approach, thinking of populism as a discursive device and a political style to overcome the subalternity of the people to the political élite ([Laclau 2005](#); [Moffitt and Tormey 2014](#)); and the ideational approach, framing populism as a thin-centred ideology revolving around the antagonism between the people and the corrupted élite and the general will as the expression of people's desire ([Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017](#)). Despite the strong methodological benefits that both have, these different approaches are flawed insofar as they investigate the phenomenon partially. On the one hand, the discursive approach tends to reduce populism to the dimension of communication, hence dismissing the potential social dynamics and political ideologies behind it. On the other, the ideational approach risks being an analytical chimaera since, in many cases, populist agendas are not defined by ideologies as much as by style.

In this framework, the conceptualisation provided by [Jägers and Walgrave \(2007\)](#) seems to bridge the gaps between them and, most importantly, provide useful methodological guidelines for investigating the phenomenon. Tellingly, the two scholars, while tapping into the traditional and recurring three elements of populism (the people, the anti-establishment stances, and the anti-élite feelings), establish a distinction between “thin” and “thick” populism. Thin populism is defined as a “political communication style of political actors that refers to the people” (p. 322). As also highlighted by [Panizza \(2005, p. 4\)](#), populism can be defined as a “mode of identification” of any political actor that discursively resorts to the sovereignty of the people and the conflict between the powerful and the powerless to create his/her political imaginary. Consequently, it consists of a communicative master frame that is employed specifically by populist actors (but not only) to appeal to the people and that, methodologically, can be used as an operational tool to analyse the political discourses and search for thick forms of populism. In this light, then, thick populism is conceived as the result of a communicative reference to the people combined with political opposition to—and exclusion of—the establishment or any, both discursively and strategically ([Jägers and Walgrave 2007, p. 323](#)). The simple referring to the people can not be linked immediately to full-fledged populism, but when it merges with anti-establishment stances and exclusionary tendencies, it can be defined as thick populism².

On the basis of these promises, what are the terms of convergences between conspiracy theories and populism, and, above all, how, then, can conspiracist populism be defined?

Besides the common people-centrism and anti-elitism that define both phenomena, three further similar features can shed light on their nexus: their inherent majoritarianism; the sense of urgency and crisis they draw on; and a latent anti-pluralism.

The inherent distrust towards the élite and the glorification of popular sovereignty (for populism) or common people reasoning (for conspiracy theories) make both phenomena primarily majoritarian—hence opposing the idea that the majority of the people should be entitled to a certain degree of primacy in decision-making without interferences ([Pirro and Taggart 2023](#)). Secondly, conspiracy theories and populism seem to also rely on a sense of urgency that is expressed in slightly different ways: while conspiracy theories—especially referring to politics—are grounded on a sense of paranoia and urgency ([Hofstadter \[1969\] 2012](#)), populism rests on a performance of crisis ([Moffitt 2015](#)) that enables it to grow and, ultimately, have success. Finally, both conspiracy theories and populism seem to share the inner logic of anti-pluralism ([Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019](#)).

Indeed, while conspiracy theories conceive politics in a non-pluralistic way, resting on the assumption that powerful conspiring élites and powerless people are uniform entities (Pirro and Taggart 2023), “populists distinguish themselves because they rely on a moral notion of a homogenous and pure people that is united by a single common identity and interest, and it is them—the populist politicians—who represent, articulate or even embody, this single united interest” (Crum 2017, p. 2).

The above similarities can help us understand why and how conspiracy theories can serve the purpose of populist agendas. Indeed, far from being simple discursive devices, conspiracy theories can both play the role of the logic of populism (Runciman 2018) and the trope thereof (Taggart 2018), as they can contribute to sustaining populist anti-pluralism and majoritarianism as well as to better perform crisis. This re-conceptualisation can potentially help distinguish between thin forms of conspiracist populism—hence sometimes employing conspiracy theories in discourses to cast doubt on specific actors or create a sense of urging threat—and thick forms of populism—namely, incorporating conspiracy theories in political ideologies to support anti-pluralism and anti-establishment feelings.

Such analysis does not entail that any form of populism is inherently conspiracist, nor that conspiracy theories are endogenous elements of populism. As both Hellinger (2019) and Markou (2022) explained, one of the main problems is adopting an equational approach that directly links conspiracy theories to any populist political experiences and resorts to the “conspiracy theory” label to discredit any kind of populism. As the above considerations have shown, conspiracy theories can also be adopted by non-populist actors in certain circumstances, and the separation between thin and thick forms of populism can help distinguish between different phenomena. However, the aim of this article is to highlight the existing nexus between these phenomena and consider those cases where CT are consciously instrumentalised by populist actors.

Two examples from recent politics can help distinguish thin from thick forms of conspiracist populism. The first example is drawn from the most recent Italian political events—more specifically, from a speech given by the Italian Minister of Agriculture, Francesco Lollobrigida, in April 2023. Speaking about migration and the decreased birth rate in Italy at the Cisl Congress (Italian Confederation for Autonomous Workers’ Unions), Lollobrigida said: “The way forward is to build a welfare system that allows people to work and have a family, supporting young couples in finding employment. We cannot surrender to the idea of ethnic replacement: Italians have fewer children, so we replace them with someone else. That is not the path”. (ANSA 2023, translated by the author). The mentioning the “ethnic replacement” has raised various controversies, as it evoked the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, a far-right-linked belief that European governments are secretly promoting migration flows from African and Muslim countries in order to replace the allegedly traditional white and Christian population on the continent. Despite the fact that the party he belongs to (Brothers of Italy) has been labelled populist and openly promotes extreme right-wing ideology against LGBTQ+ communities and immigrants, especially Muslim ones (Biancalana 2023), Lollobrigida’s speech can not be defined as an example of a thick form of conspiracist populist discourse. His employment of the concept of ethnic replacement serves, in this case, to strengthen the idea that action should be taken to increase the birth rate and that immigration can not be viewed as the only solution. As a consequence, the occasional use of a conspiracist term is an example of a thin form of conspiracist populism: resorting to it is functional to create fear and a sense of urging threat for that specific moment.

The second example is the case of Alternative for Germany (AfD), a right-wing populist party that has always strategically incorporated conspiracy theories in its political ideology and communication campaigns. In a 2018 party manifesto, for instance, AfD openly alluded to a powerful political oligarchy within the establishment conspiring to reduce popular sovereignty in Germany, hence echoing the party’s claim that the EU is part of the plan of the global élite to create a “New World Order” and dissolve nation-states (Wojczewski 2022). Resorting to anti-élite conspiracy theories proved essential to reinforce its Eurosceptic

stances and strengthen suspicions about the European Union. In the same way, in the context of the migration crisis in 2015–2016, AfD's members frequently employed the Great Replacement and Eurabia conspiracy theories to create fear around the flows of immigrants coming from African and Muslim-majority countries and urge German people to take action to avoid the "Sharification" of the country (ISD 2022). These anti-immigration and Islamophobic theories adapt properly to their populist agenda, as they emphasise the risks linked to multiculturalism and fuel the outgrouping of migrants and ethnic and religious minorities. The case of Alternative for Germany, hence, can represent a thick form of conspiracist populism. Conspiracy theories serve as the logic for AfD's populist positions, seamlessly aligning with its polarising political objectives and reinforcing the underlying ideological framework. At the same time, these theories manifest as a trope of populism itself, enhancing AfD's dualistic worldview, perception of imminent threat, and ambivalent stance towards established institutions or particular societal groups.

3. The Functioning of Conspiracist Populism

Against this backdrop, an overview of the fundamental features of conspiracist populism and their functioning is deemed necessary. A meaningful work that successfully broke down the architecture of conspiracist populism has been produced by Pirro and Taggart (2023). Indeed, the two authors identified the three core elements composing populist conspiracy theories—the "who" (the targeted groups), the "when" (the set of conditions), and the "why" (the functional utility)—and highlighted how conspiracist populists maintain their anti-pluralistic and anti-establishment stance in different situations. In addition, the literature on this topic (Moffitt 2015; Bergmann and Butter 2020; Müller 2022) suggests that it is possible to identify a fourth core element—namely, the "how" (means and methods) they can do this.

The first issue requiring attention is the set of external conditions that lead populist actors to adopt different types of conspiracy theories. Broadly speaking, we can identify three political moments driving populists to support and adopt CT: when they are part of the democratic game and they are, for instance, conducting an electoral campaign as opposition groups; when they lose elections of any kind; and when they are in power. Despite the political advantages of CTs being explored later in this section, some reflections regarding how they develop different types of narrative according to the phase they are in are necessary. Therefore, whenever in opposition, populist actors need to present themselves as the "outsider" candidates who are morally outside and above politics and are willing to change it radically (Taggart 2018). Consequently, in this context, populists tend to resort to conspiracy theories to mobilise support, demonise their opponents (frequently casting moral and ethical doubts on them), and fashion themselves as the anti-establishment actors that will put forward "people's real needs" (Bergmann and Butter 2020). The type of conspiracy narratives they employ are different when they do not perform well at the polls—hence facing a fundamental contradiction. Indeed, populist actors must explain why the (allegedly) only legitimate representatives of the people failed at elections. In this case, as pointed out by Müller (2022, p. 614), populists might suggest that the majority of the people were consciously silenced, hence claiming that the corrupted élites manipulated the electoral process. A clear example of this mechanism is the claim of Donald Trump of electoral fraud after his failure in the 2020 elections. On the contrary, a different scenario emerges if populists are in power. In this context, conspiracy theories can represent a fundamental tool to divert attention from their newly acquired establishment status and/or from their political failures in order to regain support (Pirro and Taggart 2023). For instance, after the 2013 Gezi Park protests, Erdogan frequently resorted to conspiracy theories to depict himself as the victim of a Western scheme against him and as the rightful leader defending Muslims against "the evil new world order" (Yilmaz 2021; Yilmaz and Albayrak 2021).

The second core element of conspiracist populism is the targeted groups populist CTs usually address. Going beyond simple explanations of the power bloc conspiring against citizens, Pirro and Taggart (2023, pp. 4–5) explained meaningfully the architecture

of “enemies” of conspiracist populists, hence identifying two outgroups: the internal outgroup; and the external outgroup. The internal outgroup, simply put, corresponds to those individuals or groups that are sociologically and culturally proximate (e.g., part of the same country) and pose a direct domestic threat to populist actors and the people at large. Among these, they mention mainstream and non-aligned media, political opponents, opposition parties and, of course, the national powerful élite. Conversely, the external outgroup is perceived as more distant and usually includes foreign countries, international or supranational organisations, and immigrants.

The functional utility of conspiracy theories for populists varies according to the political position they find themselves in and the challenges they are facing. In this sense, CTs can serve various purposes. Two levels of functionality can be identified: gain or maintain the support among the people; and perpetrate their power. Consequently, conspiracy theories can serve to attack their opponents in different circumstances to vilify them and undermine their credibility; present themselves as, alternatively, the heroes against or the victim of the power élite; depict the public enemy against which a political identity can be created; support and back their political manoeuvres or justify their failures; and, most importantly, foster a sense of permanent state of alert (Pirro and Taggart 2023; Müller 2022).

Creating, performing, and perpetrating a sense of crisis is the core element of how populist conspiracism works, and it exemplifies the discursive and strategic capacity of CT for populists. As Moffitt (2015) pointed out, the existence of populism is strictly linked to a sense of real or perceived crisis, as populist success is based on their capacity to perpetrate it. The six-step model of the populist performance of crisis elaborated by Moffitt can, hence, be useful to explain how conspiracist populism works.

The first step in this process is identifying a failure—especially if it has some political salience—and bringing attention to that as a matter of urgency (Moffitt 2015, p. 198). The next phase is to wisely link the chosen failure to others and locate it within a wider and structural framework, hence elevating the level of crisis. By recurring to a dramatised and simplified rhetoric, populists elevate this issue to a matter of national danger, where the temporal dimension is fundamental—therefore, stressing the need to take action immediately (p. 200). The third step consists of identifying those responsible for the crisis and demonising them as the enemy of the unknowing people who are suffering because of their actions and decisions. This very phase is crucial for conspiracist populism in two ways: on the one hand, it fosters the creation of a group identity against an enemy, as populist identity is more constructed against something than on something (Taggart 2000); on the other hand, it is fundamental to “objectively” target their opponents, hence going beyond partisan feelings or prejudices (Moffitt 2015, p. 202). The subsequent step consists of the use of media (and social media) to propagate the crisis. Here, a distinction from Moffitt’s model should be made: while the author focuses almost exclusively on traditional media, in the contemporary political arena—and when speaking of populist conspiracism—the attention should be brought first and foremost on social media. Indeed, they not only contribute to creating a context of infodemic (Annovi 2021a) to exacerbate the crisis, but they also help replace scientific validation of information with social repetition (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019). As a consequence, news does not acquire recognition because experts verified it, but by its widespread dissemination.

After a failure has been spectacularised and the sense of crisis has been spread, the next phase for populist actors is to present themselves as the heroes with the right solution. Three main performative methods are identified in this case by Moffitt (2015, p. 204): insisting on the incompetence of the political status quo; offering simple and straightforward remedies to the crisis; and finally, advocating for a radical change in the institutional functioning and the democratic process. In this framework, Taggart’s concept of “unpolitics” (2018) to describe populist *modus operandi* and approach is relevant. As pointed out by the author, the distinctive trait of populism is the rejection of the idea of politics as the rightful process to resolve conflicts. For this reason, they frequently present themselves as reluctantly

political and “will often claim to be in politics as a temporary measure to fix a crisis” (Taggart 2018, p. 81). This perspective reinforces the suggestions made by Moffitt: the façade of the outsider that engaged in politics only in the name of the people strengthens populists’ credibility, but, at the same time, their need for simple explanations is indicative of their “unpolitical” strategy.

The ultimate step of populist performance of crisis is, hence, the continuation of the propagation of crisis (Moffitt 2015, p. 205). Since the survival of populism is strictly related to its capacity to persist in performing a sense of abiding urgency, these actors have to work in this direction and fight the loss of political salience or interest in the failures they have thrived on. One of the ways they can attempt to do so is to shift their attention to another topic of public interest or concern—hence, for instance, replacing the issue of the corrupted political élite in power with the issue of the migration crisis. Another tactic is to exaggerate the extent and size of the crisis and include other new actors in the frame of enmity—such as foreign enemies or international institutions.

4. The Long Shadow of Conspiracist Populism: The Effects on Democracy

The above discussion has been useful to explore in-depth the nature of conspiracist populism and its functioning and to define a theoretical approach. Against this backdrop, a question arises: what are the effects of conspiracist populism in power on contemporary democracies and, more specifically, on the political democratic game?

This issue has been widely discussed within the academia. Some scholars, for instance, insisted on the fact that political conspiracist theories are not inherently negative or detrimental phenomena for democracies. On the contrary, they might represent a new challenge to the existing order and a new tool for political contestation (Fenster 1999; Dean 1998). A different perspective has been put forward by those scholars, focusing specifically on the impact of the spread of conspiracy theories on societal relationships and democracy. The research of Bilewicz and Stefaniak (2013), for instance, highlighted that conspiracy theories targeting a minority group, such as Jewish people, are a strong predictor of social and political discrimination in Poland. Starting from this stance, Bartlett and Miller (2010) also maintained that conspiracy theories are a leitmotiv in extremist groups and significantly accelerate the process of radicalisation by reinforcing the dynamics of Othering.

Starting from the necessary premise that conspiracy theories are “a non-necessary element of populist ideology” (Fenster 1999, p. 84), the focus of this section is on the effects of conspiracist populism when these actors are in power. As explained in the previous part, conspiracist populists act differently according to their political position within the democratic arena; accordingly, their rhetoric and actions distinctively affect politics at large when they represent the government.

The academic literature analysing the effects of conspiracist populism in power sheds light on the general detrimental and destructive impacts it has on democratic politics and institutions. The research of Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019) and Müller (2022) insisted on this topic and highlighted the problematic consequences that they might have on democracy. The first interesting insight is provided by Müller (p. 611), who argues that the populist claim to be the only legitimate actors to represent the people has two deeply democratic consequences on democracy. On the one hand, in fact, by suggesting (or accusing) that other political candidates are not entitled to put forward the needs of the people, they depict them as fundamentally illegitimate. This claim, reinforced and exaggerated by conspiracy theories, replaces the traditional political disagreement that characterises democracies with a sort of demonisation of their political opponents. On the other hand, populists tend to imply that those who do not share their understanding, ideology, and narrative are not part of the people at all. In this sense, “conflicts and disagreements—rather than being argued over in one form or another—are immediately reduced to matters of belonging” (Müller, p. 612) and, as a consequence, one side of the conflict is considered inherently illegitimate. A clear example of this process of othering and political delegitimation is Trump’s accusation in 2011 that Barack Obama was not an American citizen as he was born

in Kenya (Serwer 2020) or Erdogan's claim that a foreign interest rate lobby was behind Gezi Park protests (Nefes 2017). As Müller points out (p. 612), these claims are not only rhetorical exaggerations doomed to wane in a short period of time, but the effects can be twofold. Especially (but not only) when conspiracy theories target minority groups, they can provoke trickle-down aggression (Manne 2016) against them, hence heightening the level of violence within society. At the same time, the strengthening of a specific group identity revolving around a narrow interpretation thereof—based, for instance, on religion, ethnicity, or culture—might foster the adoption of exclusionary politics (Müller 2017). Anti-minority violence and exclusionary politics as a consequence of conspiracist populism in power can be seen in India, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's current ruling party, has conjured and spread various conspiracy theories against Muslims, who suffer from increasing social exclusion and violent attacks (Ghasiya et al. 2023).

Another extensive and accurate discussion of the impacts on democracy is provided by Rosenblum and Muirhead in their *A lot of people are saying* (2019). Referring to the phenomenon as "populist presidential power" (p. 63), they link the threats it poses to democracy to the fact that the president can normalise conspiracism and, as a consequence, render it a tool for politics to attract support and influence public opinion. Consequently, the cumulative effects of long-term and widespread conspiracism are significant. Populism, for instance, usually remains within its democratic boundaries, although hostile and reluctant towards party politics and committed to replacing representative with direct democracy (Urbiniati 2014). On the contrary, conspiracy theories tend to convert populist dichotomic views on politics into an ultimate conflict not only concerning the political fate of a country but also its survival. The simple distrust towards institutions tends to grow into depreciation and direct attack on them. In this sense, conspiracist populism in power can undermine democratic institutions and processes in two ways—namely, by simultaneously denigrating them and exploiting the very same bodies to support and back conspiracist claims (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019). The resulting risk is the creation, as the authors put it, by borrowing Lifton's term of a "malignant normality", where people become used and familiar with distorted processes and conspiracist claims and the institutions back them (p. 72).

A final interesting insight regarding this issue is offered again by Müller (2022), who considers the consequences of conspiracist populism in power in weak democracies. Indeed, the author argues that if checks and balances are fragile and they can rely on a large enough majority, these leaders or parties might also create regimes that look like democracies (p. 619). Some regimes, hence, use conspiracy theories to reaffirm the dominant and established values of an ingroup while identifying and attacking outsiders or even enforcing ideological conformity within a country (Giry 2017). As a consequence, these undemocratic systems tend to narrow the space for political contestation and reduce media pluralism.

5. Conspiracist Populism in Tunisia: The Case of Kais Saied

The above overview of the functioning and effects of conspiracist populism in power provides some interesting insights into analysing the case of the presidential political experience of Kais Saied. For this reason, a brief synthesis of the main features of the Tunisian political context is deemed necessary.

The political rise of the Tunisian president came in a phase of profound institutional, political, and economic crisis for the country. After the 2011 revolution, Tunisian politics was mostly dictated by a search for political consensus among different parties in government in an attempt to provide an adequate representation and consolidate democracy after a long period of dictatorship (Radeck 2022). However, the various technocratic and national unity governments created to fight persistent problems—e.g., high rates of unemployment, profound regional inequalities, corruption, and high inflation—failed to deliver people's demands, hence condemning the country to cyclic phases of decision-making stalemates that fed on the distrust and scepticism towards institutions (Fulco and Giampaolo 2023).

In this already highly complex framework, the election of the populist Kais Saied, a constitutionalist lawyer promising to rebuild the country and change the power-sharing institutional structure that had caged Tunisia in continuous deadlocks, did not come as a surprise. During his electoral campaign, his rhetoric always revolved around the concept of betrayal of the people (Annovi 2022). By displaying an adamant aversion to party politics and to the stagnant Tunisian parliamentary system, Saied has always accused democratic institutions of distancing themselves from the people and of remaining indifferent to their demands. Even when he became President of the Republic, he did not soften the tone of his narratives; on the contrary, while dealing with a balkanised assembly that slowed down any political initiatives, he continued instilling suspicions on Tunisian democratic institutions in the attempt to restore presidentialism in the country (Fulco and Giampaolo 2023). The general political discontent of which Saied became the spokesman has turned a social conflict into an internal clash within the institutions, bringing an already structurally fragile political situation to a breaking point and sanctioning the end of the political compromise that dominated Tunisia's post-revolutionary politics (Annovi 2021b). In this framework, worsened by the dramatic economic situation of the country and the outbreak of a new wave of coronavirus, President Saied invoked an emergency rule under Article 80 of the Constitution on 25 July 2021. Since then, the head of state has frozen and then dissolved the parliament dismissed the government, radically changed the judiciary system, and suspended the 2011 Constitution, replacing it with a text that gives him broad powers insofar that he has been described as a "hyper-president" (Nafti 2022a, p. 143). The new Constitution, which was approved a year later through a referendum in which less than a third of Tunisian voters participated due to a boycott by the opposition, reflects Saied's personal political ambitions (Brignone 2022).

In light of this, how can Saied's political experience, merging technocratic, populist, and then authoritarian features, be described? In the aftermath of the election of the Tunisian president, Michel Camau maintained that his political experience might be described as a form of populist constitutionalism, intended as a political posture prioritising the belief that constitutional law should promote rather than limit majority rule and broaden political participation (Camau 2020). As a matter of fact, Kais Saied has always criticised the 2014 Tunisian constitution—as he thought it was designed more for serving the power than for fulfilling the needs of the majority of the population—as well as the form of semi-presidential form of government, hence putting forward the idea of abolishing direct legislative elections and replacing them with local administrative districts with elected representatives (Gobe 2022). However, it is worth mentioning that, in 2020, Camau himself suggested that Saied's political experience might have turned into a (more dangerous) form of constitutional populism (2020). Populist constitutionalism is conceived as a form of populism that aims to radically change the Constitution, overcome representative politics, and make popular sovereignty the pinnacle of the new constitutional order (Blokker 2019). Therefore, if simple populist constitutionalism is more about resorting to populist features (e.g., the centrality of the people in the governance) to transform the Constitution, constitutional populism can be defined as a form of populism that aims at modifying substantially the Constitution to deconstruct the existing political regime, consolidate the power in the hands of populist leadership and present the constitutional changes as the only way to overcome the flaws of the previous order and restore popular sovereignty (Landau 2018). Today, Camau's suggestion seems correct. Since 2021, Kais Saied's political experience in power looks more like a form of constitutional populism, as he has stretched and reshaped Constitutional principles in order to create a new institutional framework; by claiming to defend "the people who want and know what they want" (Nafti 2022b), he has concentrated in his hands all the power.

Besides these observations regarding Saied's distinctive type of populism, further attention should be paid to his use of conspiracy theories on various occasions. Indeed, since 2019, Saied has frequently resorted to a number of conspiracy theories to reinforce his political positions, justify some political manoeuvres, or attack parliamentarians or

institutions. During an interview that he gave to the newspaper *Al charaa' al magharibi* during the 2019 electoral campaign, he maintained to be against homosexuality and accused the West of funding homosexuals in order to corrupt society (Nafti 2022b). Despite Article 230 of the Tunisian Constitution has always criminalised same-sex sexual activity, several Tunisian LGBTQ+ activists are blaming the state's institutions—and specifically, Kais Saied—for normalising homophobic hate speech in the country and accepting social media campaigns that suggest that homosexuality in Tunisia is supported by external powers willing to destabilise the country (El Atti 2023).

Another conspiracy theory was put forward in the immediate aftermath of the 25 July political manoeuvre of Kais Saied. At that moment, when the government was struggling with the management of external financial aid aiming at supporting the economic recovery of the country, Saied maintained that the real reason for the economic crisis in Tunisia was a widespread system of smuggling, where the distribution chains were the evil enemies trying to punish the people that supported him and his decision to suspend parliamentary activities (Nafti 2022a, p. 150). While the problem of smuggling exists and the country still suffers from the weight of the black economy, the main issue behind this conspiracist claim is that Saied maintains that speculators are not driven by economic motives but rather seek to provoke a social crisis to dismantle his power.

The period after 25 July was characterised by a substantial failure of the attempts to defuse the ongoing social and economic crisis in the country by Tunisian institutions. In order to justify such defeat, Kais Saied resorted to conspiracy theories to offload the blame on two types of scapegoats: the allegedly corrupt and devious political opposition; and illegal migrants. On the one hand, then, a significant increase in the number of arrests of oppositional figures without justification has been recorded over the last two years, and Kais Saied legitimised these arrestations by claiming that they were enemies “lurking around the people” (Dihstelhoff and Mrad 2023). On the other hand, the President responded to the 2023 new migration crisis driving Sub-Saharan migrants in the Tunisian territories by claiming that the post-revolutionary political parties organised a “criminal arrangement” to change the country's demographic composition and make Tunisia “an African country with no link to the Arab and Islamic nations” (Marks 2023). These conspiracist allegations were later followed by «Strengthening the security network and reducing the phenomenon of illegal residence in Tunisia», a campaign that led to a nationwide hunt for illegal migrants by police forces (Geisser 2023). Moreover, this conspiracy theory provoked a dramatic backlash against Sub-Saharan migrants over the years, spurring pogroms and sexual violence against them and was followed by the implementation of harsher security and military measures against migrants.

Finally, another more recent example dates back to January 2024, during the case trial of a former minister and leader of the opposition National Salvation Front, Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, accused of soliciting funds from former Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, who is currently living in the United States. According to the charges, Henry Kissinger would have offered Chahed large sums of money to undermine the state and sabotage the last local elections in December 2023 (Al Jazeera 2024). This conspiracist accusation also fits in with a broader campaign of coercive measures that were defined by Saied himself during a 2023 speech as a “national liberation war against those trying to infiltrate the State” (Dihstelhoff and Mrad 2023).

Against this backdrop, it is possible to make some considerations regarding the Tunisian case. First of all, it is evident that Saied's use of conspiracy theories is not simply a discursive strategy to occasionally cast suspicions on specific actors or groups and create fear. On the contrary, it seems backed by a political project—transforming the Tunisian institutional system and the Constitution as well as enforcing majoritarianism—and serves primarily to justify some political manoeuvre—such as in the case of the widespread arrests of political opponents and the campaign against undocumented migrants. In his rhetoric and political worldviews, people-centredness, anti-establishment stances and anti-élite feelings (specifically targeting the former political status quo) merge and create a fully-fledged

“thick” form of conspiracist (and constitutional) populism that systematically resorts to conspiracy theories to reinforce his political project and maintain consensus in a fragile moment. In this sense, conspiracy theories seem functional to two political goals for Kais Saied: while they serve to add salience to its political discourse and continuously perform crisis to maintain consensus, they are also fundamental to constructing and justifying his political project based on a complete rejection of the past administrations, a “rehabilitation” of the corrupted Tunisian political arena and a creation of a new institutional system. As a consequence, Saied’s political experience can be considered as a thick form of conspiracy populism, and Taggart’s suggestion that this type of politics might be labelled as unpolitics seems appropriate, as Saied has rejected traditional politics as a way to resolve internal conflicts.

Furthermore, it should be highlighted that the Tunisian case also demonstrates the political and social consequences of a conspiracist populism in power in a weak democracy. As a matter of fact, over the last two years, Saied’s government did not crack down solely on political opposition, frequently dismissing it as a conspiring enemy: he fiercely attacked media criticising him, contributed to normalising hate speech against specific segments of society (e.g., migrants and LGBTQ+ communities), accused civil society organisations of carrying out suspicious activities and restricted their room for manoeuvre, and, broadly speaking, suppressed free speech (Radeck 2022).

6. Conclusions

The present paper aimed to provide an in-depth literature review and critical analysis of the nexus between populism and conspiracy theories, as well as the resulting form of conspiracist populism. The goal was to provide a proper theoretical background and an analytical framework that might guide future research on this topic.

The political experience of Kais Saied in Tunisia is an interesting case study on this matter for a number of reasons. On the one hand, it offers a first starting point for investigating the convergence of constitutionalism, populism and conspiracy theories, and how the latter can reinforce them. In addition to this, Saied’s constitutional populism enables to apply the two-level analysis of Jägers and Walgrave (2007), which distinguished between “thin” and “thick” forms of extremism. Against this backdrop, it is possible to consider conspiracy theories as the core units and elements of Saied’s political style (thin populism) and investigate his discourses, as well as explore his constitutional populist project (thick populism). Moreover, the analysis of the Tunisian case offers some meaningful food for thought regarding the impact of populist conspiracy theories on democracy, especially on weak ones.

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- ¹ The present article is based on a previous working paper written by the author during her first doctoral year at Sapienza University.
- ² Within this framework, it is important to insist on the fact that populism is not exclusively a top-down phenomenon—hence, it is not pure manipulation of a powerful and savvy leadership. Rather, as Ostiguy maintained (2017), it is more a bidirectional and relational phenomenon, based on those socio-cultural and politico-cultural components that easily resonate within specific segments of society and that constitute the very foundation of their relationship.

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