Joint statement: Civil Society Groups Call for End to Crackdown in Tunisia

Joint Statements · Tunisia · 19 June 2024

The undersigned organizations call on the government of Tunisia to end its ongoing crackdown on the rights to free expression and free association and to respect the human rights of everyone in Tunisia.

In May 2024, Tunisian authorities escalated a repressive crackdown targeting human rights defenders, civil society organizations, lawyers, and journalists with new arrests, harassment, and intimidation. At the same time, Tunisian authorities are once again escalating anti-migrant rhetoric and stepping up a vicious clampdown on African foreign nationals, including migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. The Tunisian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release all those unjustly detained in the current crackdown and since President Kais Saied's power grab in July 2021; halt all collective and summary expulsions of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; and end the government's abusive practices that violate human rights in Tunisia.

After Tunisian authorities launched raids on migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees who were camping near the Tunis offices of the IOM and UNHCR on May 3 and May 4, 2024, the country expelled around 400 migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, constituting unlawful collective expulsions, and arrested at least 80 others. These raids accompanied a harsh crackdown on Tunisian civil society, in particular on organizations working to safeguard the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Since May 3, individuals affiliated with at least twelve organizations have been summoned by authorities, intimidated, investigated, or detained.

Coinciding with the arrests of civil society members, the Tunisian government intensified its repressive campaign against journalists and lawyers by detaining two lawyers and two journalists. One of the lawyers faces charges under Decree 54 (PDF), Tunisia's abusive cybercrime law, and both journalists have each been sentenced to one year in prison under the same decree. Decree 54 has become a favored tool to silence the press and free expression; since the decree went into effect, more than 60 journalists, lawyers, and political opponents have been prosecuted under the law, according to the National Union of Tunisian Journalists.

The ongoing crackdown on migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers is an alarming continuation of President Saied's xenophobic and hateful remarks of February 2023 against Black Africans, which the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) concluded were contrary to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination because they amounted to and incited or encouraged racial discrimination. President Saied's comments triggered an upsurge in anti-Black violence, including against Black Tunisians.

We are deeply concerned that, in new inflammatory remarks on May 6, 2024, he continued to allege there is a foreign-backed conspiracy to increase migration to Tunisia, and that he accused civil society groups supporting migrants of treason and receiving “billions” as a part of this plot. President Saied’s focus on vilifying the recipients of foreign funding in recent months underscores the risk that the government will make changes to Decree 88, an internationally lauded law that protects the right to the freedom of association in Tunisia, which will significantly restrict this right. On May 14, the Tunisian Prime Minister announced that a new draft association law was being finalized and would be submitted for approval to the government.

Since President Saied’s power grab in July 2021, Tunisian authorities have deliberately dismantled fundamental freedoms protected under international law by jailing political opponents and perceived critics; harassing, intimidating, and detaining journalists; arresting and jailing lawyers; and ramping up human rights violations against migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. This past month, these attacks have significantly escalated.

Tunisian authorities must urgently reverse course by releasing all those arbitrarily detained including journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders arrested in the past month, in addition to all political opponents and critics, and by protecting the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Signatories:

Amnesty International
DAWN
EuroMed Rights
FairSquare
FeMENA
Human Rights Watch
HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement
International Commission of Jurists
International Service for Human Rights
MENA Rights Group
Middle East Democracy Center
Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy

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HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement · info@humena.org