Tunisia | HuMENA: Two-Year Sentence for Ramlah Dahmani Reinforces Decree 54's Use to Punish Solidarity and Expression

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HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement condemns the in absentia verdict issued on 1 July 2025 against Ramlah Dahmani, sentencing her to two years in prison with immediate enforcement, over public statements concerning the detention conditions of her sister, Sonia Dahmani, a lawyer and political detainee imprisoned since May.

This ruling is based on Decree-Law No. 54 of 2022 on "Combating Offenses Related to Information and Communication Systems," which has increasingly been used as a tool to repress free expression, particularly when it involves criticism of the authorities or solidarity with political prisoners. Ramlah Dahmani's sentence marks a dangerous precedent, punishing a relative of a detainee merely for exercising her legitimate right to speak out and defend her family member.

Her statements included testimonies about Sonia's ill-treatment in custody and criticism of flawed judicial procedures. She also used national and international media platforms to raise awareness of the case. Such expression is protected under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right to freedom of expression and the transmission of information without interference. These actions also fall squarely within the role of human rights defenders, including family members who expose violations.

Rather than investigating the allegations of abuse against Sonia Dahmani, Tunisian judicial authorities opted to prosecute her sister, in blatant disregard of Tunisia's international obligations, most notably the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which upholds the right of individuals and groups to defend others, including by documenting and publicly denouncing violations.

The use of Decree 54 in this context exemplifies a broader pattern of weaponizing legislation for political retaliation and reframing legitimate solidarity as a cybercrime. Concerns over this abusive application of Decree 54 have been echoed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Special Rapporteurs, and several international rights organizations, all of whom have highlighted the vague terminology, lack of proportionality, and absence of safeguards against misuse.

The in absentia sentence against Ramlah Dahmani cannot be separated from the broader climate of intimidation facing the families of political detainees. This strategy aims to isolate them from public opinion, criminalize their solidarity, and push them into silence. Such actions pose a serious threat to public discourse and civic advocacy in Tunisia and establish a troubling precedent in the treatment of detainees' relatives.

Even in its absence-based form, the ruling represents yet another alarming instance of using the judiciary as an instrument of political retaliation and curbing fundamental freedoms. It reflects a clear erosion of fair trial guarantees, particularly the right to defense and to appear before an independent and impartial judge, at a time when mounting evidence suggests a lack of prosecutorial independence, in contravention of international standards. This trend further deepens the ongoing deterioration of judicial independence in Tunisia, subordinating it to executive power rather than acting as a safeguard for justice and rights.

This development underscores the accelerating decline in rights and freedoms in Tunisia, and the growing repression of human rights defenders, not only for their activism but even for expressing solidarity or having family ties to political detainees. This trajectory risks fostering an environment of self-censorship and forced silence, dismantling collective mobilization and public defense of victims.

The verdict is emblematic of a broader pattern of targeting women defenders and civilians, exposing the expansive and punitive application of Decree 54 far beyond its stated purpose. It reflects a systemic use of laws to repress political and social expression. This approach stands in direct contradiction to Articles 31 and 49 of the Tunisian Constitution, which protect freedom of expression and prohibit the enactment of laws that unduly restrict rights, except in cases of strict necessity aligned with democratic principles.

This case adds to the growing body of evidence that Decree 54 is used to criminalize feminist and grassroots voices, suppress free expression, and intimidate those who stand in solidarity. Ramlah Dahmani's sentence reinforces the urgent need for a comprehensive review of the decree to ensure alignment with Tunisia's constitutional and international human rights obligations and to guarantee that the law is not exploited to silence or intimidate women and civilians. The ongoing targeting of relatives of political detainees marks a dangerous escalation in the crackdown on civic space and suppression of social solidarity.

Targeting Ramlah Dahmani for expressing solidarity with her sister is not only a violation of her right to free expression, but it also reflects a growing pattern of gender-based repression in Tunisia. Such repression deepens the marginalization of women's voices, curtails their presence in the public sphere, and undermines equitable civic participation.

HuMENA renews its call on Tunisian authorities to immediately reverse these repressive practices, end the targeting of defenders and critical voices, and uphold civic space as a foundational pillar of any genuine democratic transition. HuMENA will continue to monitor violations related to Decree 54 and document their impact on freedom of expression and the rights of human rights defenders in Tunisia.

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