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REPORT

TUNISIA: ON THE BRINK OF CRISIS



ال نقابة الوطنية للصحفيين التونسيين
Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens

snjt

The
Coalition
For
Women In
Journalism

Photo Credit: Fethi Belaid/AFP

ABOUT US

The Coalition For Women In Journalism (CFWIJ) is a global organization of support for women journalists. The CFWIJ pioneered mentorship for mid-career women journalists across several countries around the world and is the first organization to focus on the status of free press for women journalists. Our network of individuals and organizations brings together the experience and mentorship necessary to help female career journalists navigate the industry. Our goal is to help develop a strong mechanism where women journalists can work safely and thrive.

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On 25 July 2021, Tunisian President Kais Saied suspended the Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and his parliament, and assumed emergency powers claiming there was an imminent threat to the Tunisian state. This has since been followed by a slow but sure deterioration of civil rights in the country. But in order to truly understand the threat that the journalist fraternity faces in Tunisia, it is important to shed light on the historical and political context of this moment and talk about what is at risk.

How did we get here?

It was Tunisia that lit the spark which later became the Arab Spring. Since 2010, Tunisia has been ruled by parliaments that exist upon fragile coalitions. The current government, formed in 2019, consists of representatives from The Islamist Ennahda party, the Free Destourian Party, the Heart of Tunisia, the Democratic Current, and other small miscellaneous political stakeholders. The President, however, is independent. In fact, it was Kais Saied's status as an independent candidate that resulted in his popularity.

However, the Tunisian people have grown increasingly wary of electoral politics in the last decade. The Arab Spring promised a better future, but since 2011, Tunisia has witnessed power shifts between nine different governments. Underhanded politics and corruption has been rife. The economy has taken a hit due to persistent political instability. And now it appears that the pandemic was the last straw for the Tunisian people.



Within the last year, unemployment rose to 17% and according to data by the World Bank, Tunisia's GDP contracted by 8.6 percent in 2020 alone. Coronavirus related deaths in the country kept rising with official numbers reporting 18,000 casualties, one of the highest figures of deaths per capita around the world. The government's response to the crisis remained delayed, and when at least the vaccination program was made available to those over the age of 18, mismanagement resulted in violence and stampedes at the vaccination center. Mechichi, the Prime Minister at the time, sacked the Tunisian health minister in response. However, that was not enough of a course correction in the eyes of the people. On July 25, demonstrations broke out, and protesters stormed the offices of Islamist Ennahda party, demanding Mechichi's resignation. Soon after, President Kais Saied dismissed Mechichi's government.

Where does this leave us?

Political parties and the civil society have sounded alarm over the incident. The Ennahda Party that held the majority in the parliament has termed Saied's actions a coup. However, the term requires some qualification. For one thing Kais Saied is a democratically elected representative, for another he currently seems to be the most popular figure among Tunisian citizens. Despite this, it cannot be denied that Article 80 of the Tunisian constitution, which Saied chose to dissolve the parliament through, is extremely vague in nature.



While it does grant the president extraordinary powers during exceptional circumstances, it does not clarify if dismissing a democratically elected Prime Minister and parliament is among them. It can also not be denied that Saied's move has been received with much aplomb by the autocrats in the region, causing supporters of democratic politics much concern. Several have compared what Saied has done to the ways in which Abdul Fattah al-Sisi came to power in Egypt, however, others have acknowledged that the civil society in Tunisia is far more robust and gives cause for hope.

Is Journalism in Tunisia under threat?

The short answer is yes. Since the dismissal of Mechichi's government, news media companies have been blatantly targeted. One day after the suspension of the parliament, the police stormed the offices of Al-Jazeera Arabic in Tunis. Law enforcement officers asked journalists to vacate the premises and searched the offices without any warrant. The staff was told to switch off their phones at the time and prohibited from taking their belongings.

This caused much outcry. An official statement from Al-Jazeera termed the incident an attack on press freedoms. "Al Jazeera considers this action by the Tunisian authorities as a troubling escalation and fears it will impede fair and objective coverage of unfolding events in the country," representatives from the network claimed.



The raid on Al-Jazeera's offices was also criticized by RSF spokesperson Pauline Ades-Mevel. According to the publication, Ades-Mevel told them that her team is vigilantly monitoring the situation.

"We are looking carefully at the situation. We denounce this move and we consider the pluralism of the press and the freedom of the press has to be respected by the authorities during this time when the political crisis is ongoing since yesterday night in the country," she said.

Around the same time, Vivian Yee, the Cairo bureau chief for The New York Times was taken in for questioning by the police. She was questioned for two hours at the station.

On August 7, Fadil Alirizia published a statement on his social media platforms claiming that the Tunisian government has initiated a defamation campaign against foreign journalists in the country.

What do journalists on the ground tell us?

CFWIJ got in touch with its sources on ground in Tunisia to gain further insights into the situation in the country. We spoke to freelance journalists Elizia Volkmann who informed us that both digital and physical spaces are slowly becoming hostile for journalists in Tunisia.



Since July 25, 20 attacks against journalists have been registered compared to 5 in all of June, according to Volkmann. The 400% rise in attacks on journalists within two weeks should be a cause of concern, she says. She also pointed towards the online harassment that appears to be coordinated. Twitter bots have popped up in the last month that are particularly nasty and vicious towards critics of Saied. The rhetoric these bots are perpetuating is massively influencing the political discourse on social media. Volkmann herself was trolled for questioning Saied's actions.

Despite this, Volkmann notes that the environment is much more dangerous for local media persons than foreign journalists. Local media is vulnerable to physical assaults by state authorities, something that foreign journalists are protected against. Bloggers, too, she mentions are being arrested.

The harassment that journalists are facing is insidious. They are routinely stopped by police officers and questioned without reason. They are followed by law enforcement officers and often called to the police station for interrogation for no stated reason. According to her, one of her colleagues alongside another journalist from Le Monde were apprehended and questioned while on the street, despite having done nothing to invite scrutiny. While Saied's government claims that no one is being arrested for speaking their minds, Volkmann believes that is a technicality. "They are weaponizing old defamation laws to arrest journalists," she says. Defamation is criminalized in Tunisia, which means anyone criticizing Saied at the moment, runs the risk of being arrested and tried for defaming the president.



Volkman mentions that, alongside other colleagues, also noted unusual activity on her cell phone. They have since decided to submit their phones to be scanned for infiltration by Pegasus. However, she also mentions that Pegasus is not the only surveillance software on the market. And the risk of being surveilled without knowledge is an ever-present worry. Volkman rightly brought to attention that journalists are not the only targets of these tactics, the civil society at large is facing these threats. Lawyers, human rights activists, writers, academics are all being targeted for criticizing the dismissal of the parliament.

Regarding the Al-Jazeera raid, Volkman says that persecution does not only have to come in the form of censorship or harassment from the state. For example, when Al-Jazeera's offices were stormed, many journalists believed that their careers were over. "It is not just detention violence, it is also ending livelihoods. It is more subtle than a fist in the face," she states.

What now?

Many are worried about the course Tunisian politics is about to take. Things are being kept hushed up because Volkman believes that Saied's plan appears to be to bore the world into giving up. Once the global media diverts attention from what is happening in Tunisia, much more radical political shifts can occur. "It could get worse," she warns.



However, Volkmann also places hope in the dynamism of the civil society of Tunisia. The SNJT, the Tunisian journalist union, for example has emerged as a beacon of hope in this crisis. They are readily available to support journalists currently struggling or being targeted by the state. The Al-Jazeera's Arabic staff, according to Volkmann, is currently working from the offices of the SNJT. The SNJT is also in the midst of publishing a report detailing the attacks on the media that have occurred in Tunisia since July 25. Volkmann expresses optimism in the way she sees civil society mobilize and respond to the crisis. "They have gotten rid of a dictator once, they know they can do it again," she says.

The Coalition For Women In Journalism urges global attention to what is happening in Tunisia. The news media in the country is facing subtle forms of persecution that can accelerate any moment snowballing in a larger political crisis in the country. It also needs to be understood that any attack on civic freedoms always results in a much more difficult political reality for women members of the civil society, who face the double edged sword of political oppression as well as patriarchy. CFWIJ extends its support to the journalists covering the developments in Tunisia while facing grave personal risks.



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