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Freedom Of The Press - Tunisia (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 27
Political Environment: 33
Economic Environment: 25
Total Score: 85

Tunisia's press code and constitution offer ill-defined protections for freedom of the press, and the government does not respect them in practice. The press code criminalizes libel and defamation, and violations can result in imprisonment and fines, with offensive statements about the president carrying prison sentences of up to five years. Journalists may also legally be punished for disturbing public order. In June 2010, the authorities passed a penal code amendment that increased penalties for "contacts with agents of a foreign power or a foreign organization with a view to inciting them to harm the vital interests" of Tunisia, including the country's economic interests. The amendment was an apparent attempt to halt the efforts of human rights activists and journalists who were lobbying the European Union to block an upgrade in the status of its relations with Tunisia until the Tunisian government improved its human rights record. Under the vaguely worded legislation, communication with international powers that the government considers contrary to Tunisian interests can result in prison terms of five to twelve years.

Newspapers do not need licenses to operate, though the government requires that print outlets obtain copyright registration annually from the Ministry of Information. Broadcast media are regulated by the Tunisian Frequencies Agency, which tightly controls the allocation of licenses and frequencies. Tunisia does not have a freedom of information law.

Government censorship and legal harassment of media outlets is routine. In January 2010, television correspondent Fahem Boukadous was sentenced to four years in prison for his 2008 coverage of violent labor demonstrations. Boukadous's trial lasted only 10 minutes, and he was convicted of "belonging to a criminal association" and "spreading materials likely to harm public order." His family expressed concern over prison authorities' failure to treat Boukadous's increasingly severe asthma attacks, and Boukadous himself protested this mistreatment with a hunger strike. Separately, in July, the government restricted an issue of the *Economist* because of an article that was critical of Tunisia's human rights record. The government also continued to target the opposition Arabic-language weekly *Al-Mawkif*. In September, managing editor Ahmed Nejib Chebbi alleged that government pressure on the publication's printer resulted in production delays for an issue that included multiple critical stories on the government.

Journalists who oppose the government face harassment, physical assault, arbitrary surveillance, dismissal from

employment, and imprisonment. In March 2010, police prevented journalists from covering a Human Rights Watch press conference on political prisoners in Tunisia. In April, online journalist Zuhair Makhoulouf was beaten by the police, apparently to deter him from attending a dinner for journalists held by a prominent French lawyer. In a positive development, Taoufik Ben Brik, a journalist who was critical of the government, was released from prison in April, though he faced harassment and threats later in the year. In December, Mouldi Zouabi of Radio Kalima and Ammar Amroussia of the newspaper *El-Badil* were arrested in response to their coverage of riots in the city of Sidi Bouzid.

Interrogation and detention of members of the media remain commonplace, and the government has refused to renew journalists' passports on occasion. Since President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali came to power in 1987, more than 100 Tunisian journalists have been forced into exile, according to the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT). The authorities monitor foreign media, denying accreditation to critical journalists, and foreign publications or reporters can be seized or expelled if they offend the government. The government also requires foreign journalists to have written permission to record video in public. Self-censorship among journalists is common. Due to harassment and the fear of arrest, journalists hesitate to report on sensitive political topics and generally wait for official accounts from the government's Tunis Afrique Presse agency before issuing their own coverage.

Ninety percent of domestic newspapers in Tunisia are privately owned and editorially independent, but they are still subject to pressure from the government. There are eight major dailies, including two owned by the government and two owned by the ruling party. *Al-Mawkif*, the private opposition weekly, lacks state support and advertising revenue, and its journalists are frequently denied access to government information and facilities. The Tunisia External Communication Agency allocates support to progovernment newspapers. Many foreign satellite television stations can be viewed in Tunisia, though the government has been known to block transmissions from time to time.

Approximately 37 percent of Tunisians used the internet in 2010. Internet cafés are state run and operate under police surveillance; customers must register their names and other personal information before accessing the internet. Social-networking and video-sharing sites, including Daily Motion, YouTube, and Facebook, are routinely blocked by the government. Similarly, the Tunisia Monitoring Group of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) reported in June that at least 30 websites covering news, politics, and human rights issues were blocked within Tunisia. The government continued to block access to the independent news website *Kalima* and investigate its founder, Sihem Bensedrine, for broadcast violations supposedly committed by the site's radio section. In July, the government blocked the website Fadaa Jadal Democracy, an online forum for democratic debates, before it had been officially launched. The government also blocked, without explanation, the website of the Tunisian Observatory for Union Rights in October, just hours after it launched. The government reportedly monitors internet telephony and e-mail communications. Punishments for online dissidents are similar to those for print and broadcast journalists who

publish information that the government deems objectionable. Journalists who have turned to internet media frequently face police surveillance and other forms of intimidation for expressing critical views.