

FROM BOOK BANS TO POLITICAL PRISONERS

Freedom of Expression
and Tunisia's
Struggle Against
Authoritarianism

JUSTIN SHILAD

September 2024



MEDC
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Democracy Center

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my deep gratitude to Seth Binder and Tess McEnery at MEDC for being willing to take on this report, and I am also deeply grateful to Seth as well as April Brady, Arwa Shobaki, Haydn Welch, Kristen McTighe, and Sheridan Cole at MEDC for their invaluable guidance and editing, and for steering this report through to publication on a very tight schedule. I'm indebted to Kamel Riahi and Messaoud Romdhani for participating and answering questions for this report, as well as Aymen Zaghdoudi for providing expert review and essential guidance. I began writing this report while working at PEN America and am deeply grateful as well to Dietlind Lerner, James Tager, Liesl Gertholtz, Ryan Howzell, and Summer Lopez for their advice, edits, and contributions.

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Cover photo: Tunisian President Kais Saied oversees the swearing-in ceremony of newly appointed ministers after a broad cabinet reshuffle ahead of a presidential election on October 6, August 25, 2024. Photo credit: Tunisian Presidency/Facebook

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On July 25, 2021, Tunisian President Kais Saied seized extensive powers for himself and started a sweeping crackdown on dissent that continues to this day. Saied has since systematically eliminated or neutralized institutions that could check his power and his government has arrested or harassed scores of activists, artists, journalists, lawyers, and opposition politicians. Meanwhile, Saied and his allies, both inside and outside of the government, have ratcheted up a demagogic campaign against migrants, black Tunisians, and other marginalized communities. The result is a wide-ranging campaign that is not only undoing Tunisia's gains in free expression since the 2011 revolution, but also attacking Tunisia's heterogenous cultural and social life in the name of defending national identity.

Undoing the damage to free expression in Tunisia requires policymakers to understand the roots of the crackdown, which was enabled in part by weak institutions, political paralysis, and far reaching legislation such as the anti-terrorism bill of 2015 that pitted free expression against national security in public discourse — all factors which preceded Saied's election in 2019. Reversing the current trends on free expression requires robust pushback from Tunisia's diverse civil society; it also requires the international community to support democratic institution building, prioritize free expression, and stand in solidarity with Tunisia's civil society and cultural communities. Even as Saied's crackdown extends further, there are indications that its scope has galvanized civil society to push back. But the international community, including the United States and European Union member states, have continued to prioritize anti-terrorism and, increasingly, anti-migration policies in their relationship with Tunisia. Policymakers should instead center civil society and free expression, along with the robust checks and balances and democratic institutions that enable them, as bedrocks for their bilateral relationships and regional security.



Tunisians protest against President Kais Saied's sweeping power grab in Tunis, October 10, 2021. Photo: Dodos Photography/Flickr

I. INTRODUCTION

“As for myself, I feel an overwhelming happiness that I will now be able to write freely. A year and a half ago, one of my novels, which describes life under oppression, was performed as a play at a cultural center here. Those of us involved were monitored constantly by the police; none of the journalists in attendance wrote reviews.”

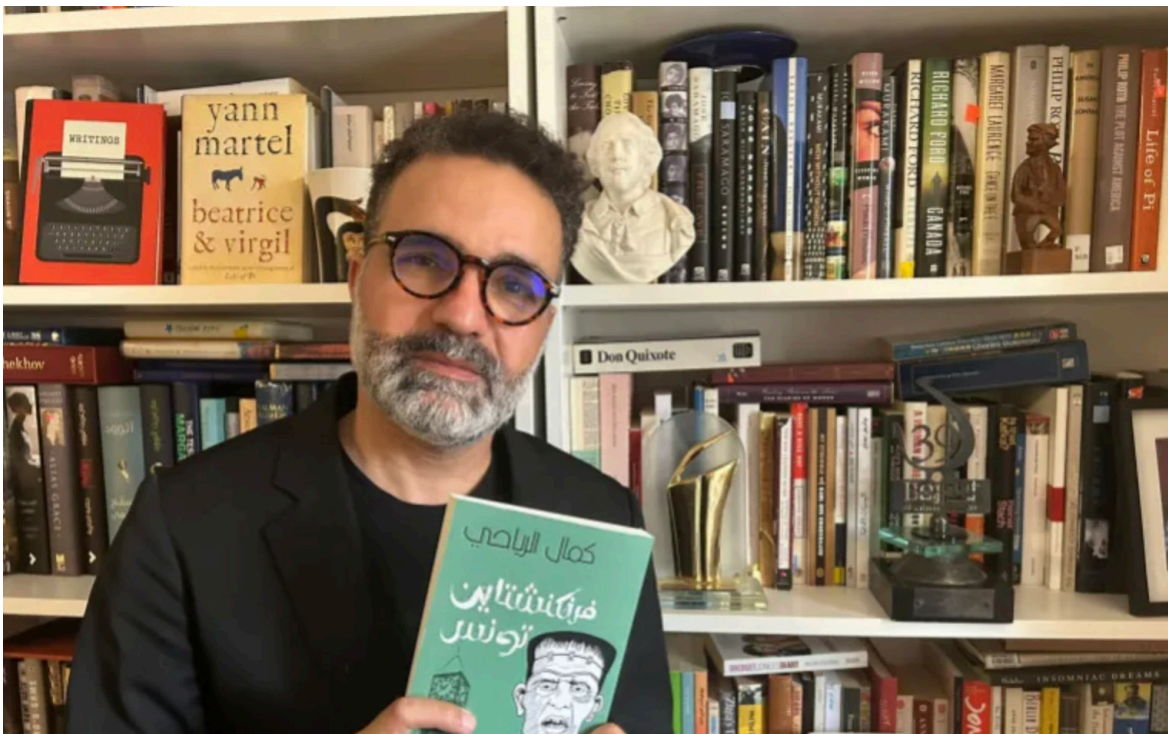
Kamel Riahi
“A Night in Tunisia”
The New York Times
January 18, 2011

Kamel Riahi wrote these words from Tunis as the regime of former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was collapsing amid nationwide protests in January 2011 and as he was daring to imagine a future where Tunisians would be free to write and express themselves. More than a decade later, in April 2023, Riahi would be living in exile in Canada, watching from afar as a book festival became another example of the ongoing crackdown on free expression, and as his book of essays critical of the government met an official reception in Tunisia far different than what he had hoped for.

On April 28, 2023, the opening day of the 37th Tunis International Book Fair, Tunisian security forces surrounded the stand of Tunisian book publisher Dar El-Kitab and seized copies of Riahi’s book, “The Tunisian Frankenstein,” while ordering the stand closed.^{1,2} The raid happened right after Tunisian President Kais Saied gave a speech marking the festival’s opening in which he emphasized the importance of freedom of thought.³ A day later, security forces seized

copies of a second book, Nizar Bahloul’s “Kais the First, President of a Drunken Ship,” and police started questioning bookstore owners in Tunis about customers who purchased Riahi’s book.^{4,5} The book bans generated enormous pushback, with other publishers closing their stands out of solidarity with Dar El-Kitab and ultimately putting the Tunisian government on the defensive.⁶ A few days after the book fair, Saied appeared at a bookstore in Tunis holding a copy of Riahi’s book, denying reports of a government censorship campaign, and saying that the publisher did not adhere to the festival’s guidelines while attacking reports of censorship as “slander and false allegations.”⁷

For Riahi, the confiscation of his book and the corresponding incitement campaign against him was not just the latest in a wave of attacks that forced him to leave his employment at the ministry of culture and emigrate from the country in April 2021.⁸ It also marked a new front in the battle over free expression in Tunisia, one in which Saied seemed to be targeting the country’s cultural life.



Author Kamel Riahi with his book, “The Tunisian Frankenstein,” which deals with the collapse of democracy in Tunisia. Last year, Tunisian authorities seized copies of his book at the Tunis International Book Fair and shut down his publisher’s stand. Photo: Courtesy of Kamel Riahi

Likewise, for Tunisian human rights activists and civil society, the book seizures marked another turn in Saied’s authoritarian power grab that started on July 25, 2021, when he froze the activities of parliament, dismissed the country’s prime minister, and claimed expanded powers for himself, including the powers to rule by decree and suspend immunity for members of parliament.^{9,10} Since then, Saied has used a combination of repressive decree laws, most significantly Decree 54, or the cybercrime law, and a noninclusive, hastily thrown together constitutional referendum to consolidate his power and essentially institute rule by fiat.^{11,12,13} At the same time, Saied has steadily chipped away at press freedom and civic space. Starting in January 2023, Saied has overseen successive waves of detentions of activists, journalists, scholars, and writers; by the middle of 2024, the arrests have expanded to include potential presidential candidates as Saied prepares to run for reelection in October 2024.¹⁴

Understanding the scope of the crackdown requires an understanding of Tunisia’s past decade and its future as imagined by Saied. Freedom of expression was one of the primary outcomes of the 2011 protests that led to the overthrow of former President Ben Ali and inspired the Arab Spring, as well as an essential component of pushing for change in other areas, including social and economic justice, after decades of authoritarian rule. The flowering of free expression after Ben Ali’s ouster, as revolutions in neighboring countries collapsed into authoritarianism or civil conflict, was cherished by many Tunisians as one of the major achievements realized by the protests.

But the assassinations of secular opposition leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmî in 2013, amid a broader campaign of extremist attacks against artists, journalists, and intellectuals, underscored the fragility of Tunisia’s civic space. The rise of the Islamic State and a series of high-profile terrorist attacks in the country and the resulting blow to the

Tunisian tourism industry heightened a sense of dysfunction and stagnation. The government passed a draconian anti-terrorism law in 2015 in response to an attack on the Bardo Museum,¹⁵ placing free expression as a luxury item rather than a fundamental right and pillar of the country's emerging democracy.

Saied has implicitly cast free expression as an impediment to Tunisia's development and security.¹⁶ By curtailing free expression, jailing journalists and writers, and launching demagogic attacks on Tunisia's pluralistic society, Saied is attacking Tunisia's cultural and intellectual life and framing those who participate in it as exogenous to the country's social fabric. Saied's racist and xenophobic rhetorical campaigns against Black Tunisians and migrants from other countries, for example, escalated into a campaign of harassment, in-

timidation, and arrests in 2024.¹⁷ By merging state-sponsored xenophobia into his broader campaign against independent journalism, critical books, and social media commentary, Saied is signaling a broader attack on political and cultural pluralism and his desire to remake the public sphere in his own image.

Yet the opposition to the government's attempts to ban books and curtail free expression more broadly hint at the limits of Saied's ambitions.¹⁸ The resistance speaks to the continued salience of free expression among the public.¹⁹ Policymakers and those who stand for human rights worldwide should note that free expression is not only a critical front against authoritarianism in Tunisia, but also the foundation for a return to democracy, and should support those in Tunisia engaged in that fight accordingly.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION DETAINEES SINCE 2023

The individuals here, detained since President Kais Saied ramped up his crackdown at the beginning of 2023, are a small sample of the over 70 activists, journalists, opposition figures, and others who have been detained or imprisoned between the end of 2022 and May 2024, according to rights groups.^{20,21} Others have been forced into exile, subjected to criminal investigations, or given suspended sentences.²²



CHAIMA ISSA

A scholar and a poet, Chaima Issa is a prominent Tunisian opposition activist with the National Salvation Front, a coalition of opposition parties.²³ Issa was arrested on February 22, 2023 on charges of inciting soldiers to disobey orders and insulting Saied.^{24,25} She was investigated by a military court related to an interview she had given under Decree 54, a draconian cybercrime law instituted the year before. She also faced an investigation in an anti-terrorism court for charges of “trying to change the nature of the state,” which mandates the death penalty, and other charges under the country’s 2015 anti-terrorism law.²⁶ Issa was released in July 2023, but banned from public appearances or traveling outside the country.²⁷ In December 2023, a military court convicted Issa of undermining state security and sentenced her to one-year in prison, which she has since appealed.^{28,29}



KHALIFA GUESMI

A correspondent for Mosaïque FM, Khalifa Guesmi was arrested and held for a week in March 2022 after reporting on a counterterrorism operation and charged with “disclosing national security information.”³⁰ Although he was initially sentenced to one year in prison,³¹ Guesmi appealed the decision and was then sentenced to five years in prison in May 2023.³² Tunisian authorities took Guesmi into custody on September 3, 2023, to begin serving his prison sentence.³³ Guesmi was released from prison in March 2024 after Tunisia’s Court of Cassation overturned his sentence and ordered a new trial.³⁴



TAWFIQ OMRANE

A cartoonist with a history of sharp critiques of the Tunisian government, Tawfiq Omrane was detained and questioned on September 22, 2023 for his cartoons mocking the Tunisian prime minister at the time.³⁵ Omrane started publishing his cartoons in the 1970s and suspended his work after censorship increased under Ben Ali’s rule in the 1980s, but he resumed drawing after the 2011 uprising.³⁶ In a January 2024 interview, Omrane said he believed that his caricature of Kais Saied as a “Tunisian Frankenstein” may have prompted his arrest.³⁷



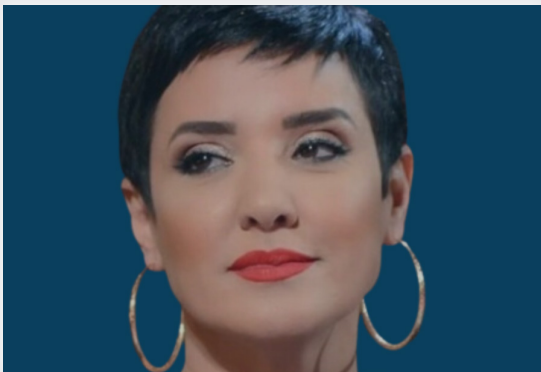
MOHAMED BOUGHALLEB

Mohamed Boughalleb is a journalist who contributes to the radio station Cap FM and other outlets.³⁸ Authorities investigated Boughalleb twice in April 2023, once facing charges of “terrorist conspiracy” and once under Decree 54 in response to a complaint by an employee from the Ministry of Religious Affairs accusing him of slander.^{39,40} In March 2024, Boughalleb was arrested because of the Decree 54 complaint, and four days later was put in pretrial detention after he promised in court to publish an article reporting on corruption in government ministries.⁴¹ While Boughalleb was already detained, another judge remanded him in custody on April 5 under a separate Decree 54 charge.⁴² In April 2024, Boughalleb was sentenced to six months in prison for “insulting a public official.”⁴³



BORHEN BSSAIS & MOURAD ZGHIDI

Borhen Bssais and Mourad Zghidi, both journalists for radio station IFM, were arrested May 11, 2024, and ordered held in pretrial detention for “publishing news that includes personal data and false news aimed at defamation;” Zghidi posted on social media in solidarity with Mohamed Boughalleb, while Bssais was charged for radio and TV commentary critical of Saied.⁴⁴ Both were convicted May 22 of defamation and spreading false news under Decree 54 and sentenced to a year in prison.⁴⁵



SONIA DAHMANI

Sonia Dahmani, a lawyer and political commentator, was arrested on May 11, 2024, in a raid by masked police on the headquarters of the Tunisian Order of Lawyers and charged with “inciting hate speech” and “false information with the intention of undermining public safety” under Decree 54.⁴⁶ Dahmani was sentenced to one year in prison on July 6, 2024.⁴⁷ Police also briefly detained France 24 cameraman Hamdi Tlili, interrupting his broadcast while he was in the middle of covering Dahmani’s arrest on live TV.⁴⁸



YOUSSEF CHELBI & DHIA NSIR

Youssef Chelbi and Dhia Nsir are students who were arrested on May 17, 2023, after posting a video on social media singing a satirical song about police brutality and drug laws in Tunisia.⁴⁹ The song included lyrics referring to Tunisia as a large prison.⁵⁰ A judge ordered them released a day later after a mass outpouring of criticism of the arrests. Saied himself publicly criticized their arrest,⁵¹ potentially recognizing that public backlash would ensue as his crackdown extended further into free expression cases.



Demonstrators protest against former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali outside the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party's headquarters in Tunis, January 2011. Photo: Chris Belsten/Flickr.

II. FREE EXPRESSION IN TUNISIA, BEFORE AND AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Tunisian public life was cordoned off by broad restrictions on free expression prior to the 2010–2011 protests. Under former President Ben Ali, the Tunisian government broadly repressed freedom of speech, media activity, access to the internet, and cultural life in the country. The U.S. State Department's 2010 human rights report on Tunisia, the last before the revolution, documents the government's attempt to extend its reach into every corner of Tunisia's civic space, including by blocking and monitoring website activity, censoring university publications, and requiring prior approval for theatrical and art productions that were not official state-sponsored events.⁵²

"My battle with the regime of Ben Ali was a battle of freedoms, freedom of expression and democracy, which appeared in my works of fiction, novels, and my art diary *Wahid-Sifr lil-Qatil* (One-Nil to the Dead Man), which I wrote in

Algeria after I went on hunger strike in Tunisia in 2009, forcing me to leave the country," Riahi said in response to questions for this report.⁵³

The situation was similarly dire for freedom of the press, with the U.S.-based group Freedom House saying in 2010, "Tunisia has one of the worst media freedom environments in the Arab world."⁵⁴ Criminal penalties for libel and defamation, arrests and assaults against journalists, monitoring international media organizations, blocking websites, and barring satellite broadcasts were just some components of the arsenal that Ben Ali's government wielded against the press.⁵⁵ His government combined heavy-handed censorship with a strong network of state-sponsored media outlets and privately owned media outlets that were closely aligned with (and subsidized by) the state.⁵⁶

In this environment, freedom of expression was a contested space during the December

2010–January 2011 protests that ultimately resulted in Ben Ali’s ouster. When demonstrations first broke out after produce vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest against ill-treatment by the local authorities, the government immediately attempted to black out local news coverage of the ensuing protests in Sidi Bouzid.⁵⁷ As the protests spread nationwide, scores of journalists attempting to cover them were arrested.⁵⁸ The government censored social media pages and stole user login credentials⁵⁹ in an apparent attempt to hack pages,⁶⁰ all while state-aligned outlets smeared other journalists who covered the demonstrations.⁶¹ But as the protests wore on, Ben Ali appeared to relent, and a couple of days before the end of his 23-year rule in an apparent sop to the demands of protesters, he promised “total freedom for the media with all its channels and no shutting down Internet sites and rejecting any form of monitoring of it.”⁶²

Economic and social justice issues were also primary factors driving Tunisians into the streets. Under Ben Ali, corruption flourished and unemployment grew, hitting the country’s youth particularly hard, while social safety nets were weakened following neoliberal reforms.⁶³ Even as Tunisians from all walks of life joined the protests, civil liberties and democracy were not necessarily the foremost demands of all the protesters, according to Messaoud Romdhani, former president of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES).

“I think that freedom of expression was part of the worries of the elite: human rights activists, trade unionists, leaders of political parties,” Romdhani said.⁶⁴ “Young people who got to the streets were more interested in getting jobs, getting infrastructure and services in poor areas and deprived regions.”

Romdhani added that he did not see these de-

mands as being in competition with demands such as economic justice and good governance. “Democracy and human rights were seen only as a way to reach justice and good governance and get rid of cronies,” he said. “We have never lived under a democratic regime. Neither did any Arab country, through history. People saw

“The following years of Tunisia’s democratization would provide fertile soil for freedom of expression, while simultaneously setting the stage for its potential rollback.”

it, I think, only as a way to establish more equity. Besides, most elites came from leftist and Islamist ideologies where democracy is not interpreted the way western democracies see it.”

The 2010–2011 protests brought together a broad coalition of Tunisians who successfully ousted Ben Ali and made immediate gains in free expression that would have been unimaginable even just a month prior. But the democratic framework that would be necessary to enshrine those rights while also delivering on popular demands for social and economic justice was nascent and meant that freedom of expression in Tunisia landed on shaky ground. The following years of Tunisia’s democratization would provide fertile soil for freedom of expression, while simultaneously setting the stage for its potential rollback.



Flowers lay at the grave of Tunisian opposition leader Chokri Belaid, following his assassination on February 6, 2013. Photo: Yamen/Wikimedia Commons.

III. POST-REVOLUTION: DEMOCRATIZATION AND SECURITY, AND A LAW THAT WOULD COME BACK TO HAUNT TUNISIA

Within a week of Ben Ali's ouster, the doors to freely exchanging ideas seemed to literally open, as Tunisians flooded newsstands and bookstores to read exposés on the erstwhile ruling family and books that were forbidden for decades.⁶⁵ But the architecture of Ben Ali's oppression remained in place; while Tunisia's interim government suspended the country's constitution, it left in place security services used to decades of repression and many of the existing laws that could limit freedom of speech.⁶⁶ In particular, parts of the country's penal code laying out criminal penalties for insulting or defaming state officials remained in effect.⁶⁷

Tunisia also began to experience overlapping political and economic crises after the revolution. The Islamist party Ennahda entered into

a power sharing agreement with several other parties in the interim period after winning a majority of seats in the constituent assembly, promising to respect democracy and pluralism in Tunisia.⁶⁸ Yet there was also vigorous debate between different factions within Ennahda at this time over the formally delineated role of Islam in the new constitution, and therefore in the country's overall governance.⁶⁹ At the same time, secular and leftist political parties, some civil society groups, and broad swaths of the Tunisian population were deeply distrustful of Ennahda and other religiously oriented political parties.

A series of assassinations of prominent leftist political figures in 2013 not only deepened the suspicions of Ennahda, but also underscored the dangers facing writers and others

speaking freely on political and social issues. Opposition leader Chokri Belaid was gunned down on February 6, 2013, a day after receiving death threats and calling for a national conversation on political violence.⁷⁰ Several months later a second opposition leader, Mohamed Brahmi, was assassinated as well.⁷¹

The shootings of Belaid and Brahmi came amid a string of attacks against academics, journalists, and cultural professionals, which many felt Ennahda was responsible for or supportive of.^{72,73} The previous year, Salafi groups had ransacked an arts fair in Tunis,⁷⁴ prevented a Sufi music performance in Kairouan, and assaulted the poet Sghaïer Ouled Ahmed for writing poetry critical of Islamists.⁷⁵ Post-revolution Tunisia had seen an initial opening of civic space, but the attacks on opposition activists, artists, and poets showed that the increased openness allowed for new threats against cultural creators, both from illiberal forces previously repressed under Ben Ali,⁷⁶ and from an apparent breakdown of the rule of law.⁷⁷

Yet even as this violent campaign targeted freedom of expression, the space for writers was still unprecedented compared to the Ben Ali era. “After the revolution, there was a large amount of freedom,” Riahi said. “Some extremists were opposed to it, but the government protected artists and writers from them.” He added that the government—in which Ennahda shared power in a consensus government—similarly defended him when extremists attacked him for appearing on a television program in 2015.⁷⁸

The fallout from the shootings continued to polarize political forces in the country, which destabilized the country’s fledgling democratic politics. At the same time, security concerns began to mount as militant groups attacked civilian and military targets,⁷⁹ and Tunisia emerged as the largest source of foreign fighters for the Islamic State group. In March 2015, gunmen attacked the internationally renowned Bardo National Museum in Tunis, killing nearly two dozen people, many of whom were international tourists.⁸⁰ The

museum holds artifacts and mosaics dating back millenia and is treasured by many Tunisians as a vital symbol of Tunisian cultural identity and keeper of the country’s cultural heritage.⁸¹ The Bardo assault, targeting both the country’s cultural life and economic lifeline, became the immediate catalyst for harsh new measures in the name of security.⁸² A little over a week after the Bardo Museum attack, the government sent the draft of a new anti-terrorism law to the Tunisian parliament.⁸³

“Post-revolution Tunisia had seen an initial opening of civic space, but the attacks on opposition activists, artists, and poets showed that the increased openness allowed for new threats against cultural creators, both from illiberal forces previously repressed under Ben Ali, and from an apparent breakdown in the rule of law.”

Then in June, gunmen stormed a resort in the coastal city of Sousse and killed 38 people in a fresh blow to the country’s psyche.⁸⁴ The sprawling new anti-terrorism law passed parliament the next month with near unanimous support, despite the concerns of human rights groups that the legislation could threaten freedom of expression and civil liberties.⁸⁵

The new law defined physical damage or destruction of a broad range of private and public property as terrorism, and prohibited



A bullet hole marks a glass display case at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, after gunmen attacked the museum in 2015. The museum is seen as a vital symbol of Tunisian cultural identity and keeper of the country's cultural heritage. Photo: Kristen McTighe

a broad range of speech now legally defined as “praising terrorism.”⁸⁶ Tunisian MPs who abstained during the vote on the bill worried that the vague definition of terrorism could result in protesters being detained.⁸⁷ The law also extended the amount of time that a suspect in a terrorism-related case could be held incommunicado without charge from six to 15 days, gave Tunisian security and intelligence forces broad latitude to conduct surveillance and eavesdrop on communications, and gave judges the power to close trial sessions to the public as well as to allow anonymous testimony against defendants.⁸⁸

Though the anti-terrorism law was problematic, particularly from a free expression standpoint, the institutional context in which it was passed was equally concerning. Under Tunisia’s 2014 constitution, forming a constitutional court required Tunisia’s

president, parliament, and judiciary to name four judges each to sit on the bench (to form a court of 12 judges total); parliament to approve all of the judges; and the president to sign off.⁸⁹ Tunisia’s political deadlock meant that several iterations of governments could never agree on the court’s composition,^{90,91} and therefore there was no effective check or review on laws such as the antiterrorism law.¹

The 2015 attacks heightened the public’s anxiety over the security situation in the country and its spillover effect on the economy, but the concerns of some lawmakers who abstained from voting for the bill proved prescient. The anti-terrorism law and concurrent lack of a constitutional court ended up giving a future government the tools it needed to crack down on a range of dissent, which imperiled the civic space and public life that the constitution sought to protect.



Tunisian President Kais Saïed at the formal procession handing over power following his election, October 23, 2019. Photo: Official Facebook Page of the Tunisian Presidency

IV. SAIED'S ELECTION AND THE CRACKDOWN ON FREE EXPRESSION

Kais Saïed was elected president of Tunisia in 2019 amid a fraught moment domestically: economic stagnation reigned and continued concern over the direction of the country increased with the passing of President Beji Caid Essebsi.⁹² Saïed was previously a respected but little-known law professor, and during the campaign he appealed “to the growing number of Tunisians who [had] become disillusioned with the country’s political parties.”⁹³ He avoided almost all trappings of a traditional campaign, and in the second round went up against well-known media tycoon Nabil Karaoui, who spent much of the campaign in prison on corruption charges.^{94,95} Saïed’s positions as a candidate were mercurial: he advocated for direct democracy and recall elections,⁹⁶ but also spun conspiracy theories about homosexuality being a foreign imposition upon Tunisians⁹⁷ and spoke broadly about foreign interference, floating a ban on foreign funding

for civil society and questioning the validity of Tunisia’s democratic transition since the 2011 protests.⁹⁸

Saïed did not initially make moves to change the balance of power within the state, but continued economic struggles, dysfunction in parliament, and fallout from the global COVID-19 pandemic put the country in an ever more precarious position in mid-2021. Protests gripped the country, driven by frustrations over unemployment, corruption, government negligence, and police harassment and brutality.⁹⁹

On July 25, 2021, Saïed announced¹⁰⁰ that he was dismissing Hichem Mechichi as prime minister and shuttering parliament for 30 days.^{101,102} Saïed invoked Article 80 of the constitution to rule by decree and suspended the parliament^{103,104} in clear defiance of the constitution.^{105,106} The ongoing absence of a

SAIED'S CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

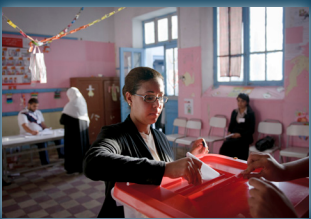
President Kais Saied expanded his power on July 25, 2021, by dismissing Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and shuttering parliament for 30 days. Over the next several months, Saied removed the remaining checks and balances on his presidency and upended Tunisia's nascent democracy:



PARLIAMENT: Saied initially halted legislative activity for 30 days, and then extended the parliament shutdown indefinitely the next month.¹⁰⁷ At the end of the year he announced he would bar parliamentary activity until after Tunisians voted on a new constitution.¹⁰⁸ Tunisian MPs attempted to organize a parliamentary session in March 2022 in defiance of Saied's orders; in response, Saied officially dissolved parliament—something he had previously said he did not have the power to do—and accused MPs of “conspiring against state security” and attempting a “failed coup.”¹⁰⁹



JUDICIARY: Saied dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, an independent constitutional body responsible for the functioning and independence of the judiciary, by decree in February 2022.¹¹⁰ He quickly appointed a new council and gave himself expanded powers over the council, and in June 2022 he gave himself the power to fire judges outright.¹¹¹ Saied fired 57 judges the same day, triggering weeks of protests from Tunisian judges' unions.¹¹² The administrative court ordered 49 of the judges reinstated in August 2022, but Saied's government ignored the order.¹¹³ The crackdown on the judiciary was part of a larger campaign against independent institutions; in August 2021 authorities shuttered the National Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC)¹¹⁴.



ELECTIONS: In April 2022, Saied gave himself the power by decree to appoint the nine members of Tunisia's Supreme Independent Elections Commission (SIEC), the body responsible for administering elections, counting ballots, and announcing the results, and whose members had previously been chosen by parliament.¹¹⁵ With this power grab, Saied had seized control of one of the last remaining independent state institutions.



MEDIA: The day after Saied seized power, security forces raided Al Jazeera's Tunis bureau and security forces assaulted journalists covering protests in response to Saied's announcement.¹¹⁶ Later that year, Tunisian authorities raided the Zaytouna 24, and Tunisia's High Independent Authority of Audiovisual Communication (HAICA) shut down other media outlets for operating without a license.¹¹⁷

constitutional court meant that there was no one to hear a legal challenge to Saied's consolidation of power. In claiming extraordinary executive powers and the ability to rule by decree, Saied lifted immunity for members of parliament and vested himself with the power of the public prosecutor.

Saied's crackdown began the next day, and the first targets were media outlets. Tunisian security forces raided Al Jazeera's Tunis bureau, seizing equipment and barring staff from the premises.¹¹⁸ In October, security forces raided the offices of Zaytouna 24, a news channel affiliated with Ennahda, and arrested Amer Ayad, one of its hosts,¹¹⁹ reportedly after he recited a poem that was interpreted as insulting the president.¹²⁰ The same month, security forces raided the offices of Nessma TV, affiliated with former presidential candidate Karoui, along with other broadcasters for ostensibly operating without licenses, even though they had done so for years without official reaction.¹²¹

Saied also began targeting the judiciary and other independent government institutions. In August 2021, Saied shuttered the National Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC), one of the independent institutions created in the 2014 constitution.¹²² That same month he placed dozens of judges under house arrest without giving notice to the Supreme Judicial Council, which ensures the independence of the judiciary and oversees discipline of judges under the 2014 constitution. Then, in February 2022 he abolished the council outright, replacing it with a provisional body in line with his preferences.^{123,124} Saied formally dissolved parliament in March 2022 after it had remained frozen since the previous year,¹²⁵ and a few months later put forth a referendum on a new constitution that significantly altered the balance of power towards the presidency, including by having the still-notional constitutional court be composed of judges solely appointed by the president.¹²⁶

Having removed many of the remaining checks and balances, Saied's presidency began moving against dissent in more fundamental ways. In September 2022, Saied issued Decree

54,¹²⁷ which came to be known as the cybercrime¹²⁸ law. The law outlines criminal penalties for a broad range of offenses, including spreading or distributing "fake news," as well as "attributing untrue matters with the aim of defaming others, tarnishing their reputation, harming them materially or morally, inciting attacks against them, or encouraging hate speech."

The law stipulates up to five years' imprisonment, increasing to 10 years if government officials were the targets.¹²⁹ Additionally, the decree builds on the government's power to intercept communications in the 2015 anti-terrorism law by giving it the ability to seize stored data¹³⁰, view communications and monitor web traffic, as well as compelling

“By the end of 2022, the synchronicity between expansive laws, co-opted institutions, and the president's demagogic instincts would bode ill for Tunisian civil society.”

telecommunications companies to hand over such data. The law did not clearly delineate what constitutes "fake news," making it an easy weapon to wield against anyone deemed critical of the government or its policies.¹³¹

Alongside the 2015 anti-terrorism legislation, the cybercrime law has become the main blunt force instrument of Saied's crackdown. By the end of 2022, the synchronicity between expansive laws, co-opted institutions, and the president's demagogic instincts would bode ill for Tunisian civil society. At the beginning of 2023, Saied oversaw a broad campaign of arrests that continues at the time of this report's publication. In February 2023, authorities arrested at least 17 people, including scholar, writer and opposition activist Chaima Issa,

Mosaique FM radio station head Nourredine Boutar, and think-tank founder Khayam Turki, amid a wave that also targeted lawyers and the political opposition.¹³⁵ The crackdown soon expanded in the following months to include the detention and eventual sentencing to one year in prison against Ennahda party leader Rached Ghannouchi.¹³⁶ The charges and investigations against them put Saied's arsenal on full display.

At this time, Saied's nationalist and conspiratorial bent hinted at during his presidential campaign also came to the forefront: in February 2023, Saied gave a speech in which he accused unspecified "parties" of using the 2011 uprising as cover to change Tunisia's demographics by importing Black migrants from other parts of Africa in order to make

the country "an African country with no link to the Arab and Islamic nations."¹³⁷ It was an echo of the great replacement theory that was voiced by right-wing political movements in North America and Europe and has inspired mass shootings in Norway, New Zealand, and the United States.¹³⁸ In Tunisia, however, it was inspired by a little-known nationalist party that went a step further and said that the conspiracy was a foreign-funded plot, while attempting to draw parallels with the Israeli occupation of Palestine in order to paint both the occupation and irregular migration to Tunisia as part of the same nebulous foreign plot.¹³⁹

Saied's comments were unmoored from Tunisia's demographic and geographic reality;¹⁴⁰ nonetheless, they prompted an outpouring of

DECREE 54

Decree-Law No. 2022-54 on Combating Crimes Related to Information and Communication Systems — known as the cybercrime law — was issued in September 2022 and has emerged as the spearpoint of Saied's escalating crackdown on free expression as of mid-2024. Some key facts about the law:

VAGUE WORDING & DRACONIAN SENTENCES:

The law threatens five years in prison and a 50,000 dinar (\$16,495) fine for spreading "false news" with the intent of "infringing on the rights of others, harming public security or national defense, or spreading terror among the population," with the penalties doubled if directed against a public official.¹³² These vague terms and phrases aren't specified further, leaving ample scope for the law to be weaponized against activists and dissidents.

INTRUSIVE DATA & SURVEILLANCE:

Decree 54 gives authorities broad power to intercept and monitor communications, as well as access data — and compels service providers to hand over data when demanded by Tunisian authorities.¹³³

SCORES DETAINED & VOICES SILENCED:

The National Union of Tunisian Journalists said that authorities have prosecuted over 60 journalists, lawyers, and opposition activists under the law.¹³⁴

the government began cracking down on activists and organizations advocating against racism and on behalf of migrants; authorities arrested Saadia Mosbah, a prominent Black Tunisian activist and head of the anti-racism organization Nmenty, as well as Zeid Rouin, the group's program coordinator.¹⁴⁴ Rouin was released, but Mosbah was ordered held for 10 days for questioning under the anti-terrorism law and remains detained as of this report's publication. Authorities also arrested members of at least two other organizations supporting migrants, the Tunisian Refugee Council and Terre d'Asile Tunisie.¹⁴⁵

The crackdown on migrants merged with an uptick in the crackdown on free expression; pro-government media figures targeted Mosbah with an online harassment campaign shortly before her arrest, and on the day of her arrest Saied referred to the heads of organizations helping migrants as "traitors."¹⁴⁶ Authorities also arrested journalist Sonia Dahmani in May after she made comments on television questioning Saied's rhetoric on migration and charged her under Decree 54; she was sentenced to one year in prison in July.¹⁴⁷ She was one of five arrests of journalists between May 11-13.¹⁴⁸ In the weeks that followed, there would be more arrests under the decree, including labor activist Abdelkader Mansour for a satirical social media post,¹⁴⁹ and former mayor of Tabarka Amel Alaoui, who was sentenced to a year and a half in prison under the law for criticizing a local businessman's land

grab in the region.¹⁵⁰

The broad use of incitement and hate speech on the part of Saied pointed to a troubling

“The broad use of incitement and hate speech on the part of Saied pointed to a troubling new dimension of his crackdown: the use of outright lies and propaganda to crowd out dissenting voices and endanger anyone from a marginalized community in Tunisia who might speak out or assert their identity.”

new dimension of his crackdown: the use of outright lies and propaganda to crowd out dissenting voices and endanger anyone from a marginalized community in Tunisia who might speak out or assert their identity. Saied's attempt to redefine Tunisian identity in chauvinistic terms indicates the potentially far-reaching consequences for cultural life in the country.

KAMEL RIAHI

An Unprecedented Attack on a Writer in Post-Revolution Tunisia

Kamel Riahi's "The Tunisian Frankenstein" is a collection of op-eds and essays critically appraising politics and the state of freedom in Tunisia after the revolution, but it also chronicles the changing fortunes of free expression in Tunisia since the 2011 revolution. For Riahi, the book was personal, as he left the country in 2021 after a Hebrew translation of his novel made him the target of an incitement campaign.¹⁵¹

"'The Tunisian Frankenstein' collects my activities as an op-ed writer since 2011, but I dedicated the bulk of it to [my writings after] the July 25, 2021 coup," Riahi said. "I was fighting, from my position as a writer, against a return to dictatorship and the assassination of the Arab Spring, [since] I was among the youths who led it in 2011. This is also my duty as a journalist as well, as I spent 25 years in Tunisian, Arabic, and international media defending freedom of expression."¹⁵²

The book was scheduled for publication on April 28, which was incidentally also the first day of the book fair, leading to calls on social media by Saied's supporters for Riahi to be arrested and his book banned.¹⁵³ But when security agents showed up at the book fair, seizing copies of the book and shuttering the publisher's stall, the pushback was immediate.¹⁵⁴

Other publishers closed their stalls in solidarity, and news of the book confiscations spread, along with reports that police were telling bookstores not to sell Riahi's book.¹⁵⁵ (Authorities also seized copies of Nizar Bahloul's book "Kais the First, President of a Drunken Ship," which, as Bahloul noted, had first been published nearly two and a half years before the book fair.¹⁵⁶)

Coming on the heels of a broad opposition crackdown, the book seizures seemed to mobilize Tunisian civil society and literary figures. "There was a great campaign of solidarity with me among readers and some of the free thinkers, and among the bookstores that decided to sell the book and embarrass the authorities. That's what contributed to the release of the book, despite it being banned at the book festival," Riahi said.

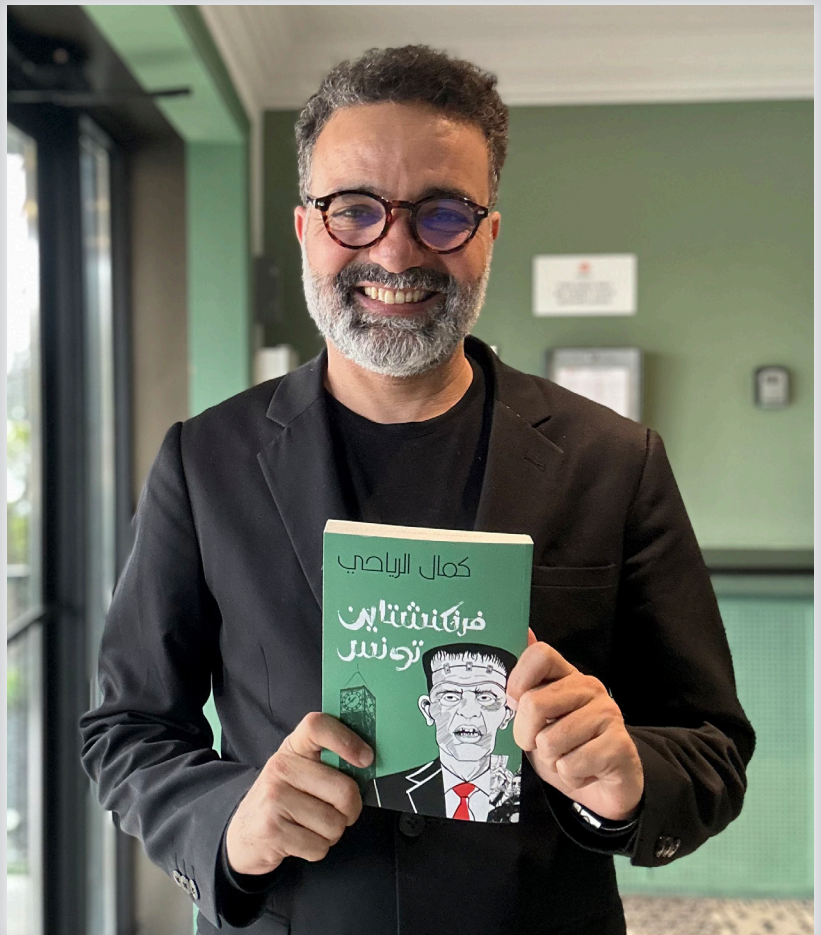


Photo: Courtesy of Kemal Riahi



Tunisians take to the streets in Tunis to protest President Kais Saied's sweeping power grab, October 10, 2021. Photo: Dodos Photography/Flickr

V. THE PATH FORWARD

Although the attempt to ban Kamel Riahi's book and the resulting reaction has not stopped the Tunisian government's crackdown on free expression, it did point to the potential for Tunisia's civil society and cultural communities to push back. For Riahi, if Saied's attempt to destroy freedom of expression in Tunisia is successful, the cost will not only be democracy and freedom generally in Tunisia, but the character of Tunisia itself.

"The regime has relapsed into an image of chauvinism that's promoting racism against Black [people] and against ethnic minorities, such as Jewish [people]," he said. "This is a dangerous matter that's happening for the first time in Tunisia, and behind it are the president's speeches that are anti-semitic and [racist against] Black people from sub-Saharan Africa."

Riahi added that programming on state media channels has been inciting hatred against

a range of perceived enemies. These range from opposition figures to academics who participated in conferences about Tunisia's Jewish community.^{157,158} "Many writers are now afraid to speak out or write against the government after the fate became imprisonment," he said, citing Issa's detention as an example. "The authorities have now sought to plant cultural programs on public television, which it controls, in order to defame the opposition writers and called for their trial."¹⁵⁹

Indeed, even as Tunisians continue to air dissent, a chill has become more apparent as arrests and censorship gather speed. When Ghannouchi was sentenced to additional time in prison at the beginning of 2024, the reaction from civil society and media was muted.¹⁶⁰ In Riahi's telling, wiping out freedom of expression in Tunisia will leave a void that the government and its allies will fill with hatred and propaganda, unless the international

community takes a strong stance. Under Saied, the government has “shown its fangs and is behaving very brazenly,” Riahi said.¹⁶¹ “Therefore, Tunisia needs a strong stance from the international community in order to constantly expose the regime’s practices and spread awareness of [the importance of] rights and freedoms, because the regime began to nurture a society and generations desperate for change and completely submissive to it.”

Yet the continuing pushback against the government’s crackdown points to an opening for change, as small as it may be. For example, though Saied’s visit to the bookstore where he held up Riahi’s book and loudly proclaimed it wasn’t banned was an exercise in cynicism, it showed that Saied felt compelled to defend and deflect his government’s actions due to the forceful pushback from civil society. And this episode, as well as public protests against other arrests and acts of censorship, demonstrate the resolve of the Tunisian public to reclaim their rights.

“I think that people began to realize the importance of liberty,” Romdhani, the former head of FTDES said. “The ten preceding years...despite problems and quarrels, had given people a taste of what freedom was. Some thought that Saied’s ‘clean hands’ and governance would establish a justice they were longing for. They were ready to sacrifice freedom and democracy. They realized now that they lost freedom and there has been no sign of good governance and justice.”

Public pushback to the book banning episode could be a roadmap for how Tunisia’s civil society and cultural sector could further stand against the crackdown. Shortly after the book confiscations, the police arrested two students, Youssef Chelbi and Dhia Nsir, after they published a satirical song criticizing and mocking the police, only to be quickly ordered released by a judge after widespread protest culminated in Saied himself criticizing the arrest.¹⁶² Yet,

the arrests of journalists and opposition figures have continued and while these protests may have made the current government more wary of provoking public backlash in certain instances, it has not ended the crackdown.

Constrained as they are, Tunisian courts can still act as a check on the Saied government’s arrests and restrictions on expression, and Tunisian authorities still have space to back off of their campaign. Crucially, the United States and European Union member states’ governments can oppose freedom of expression violations, prioritize rights and democracy in their relationship, and support civil society and cultural and media organizations. Most importantly, the United States and EU member states can press Tunisian authorities to revise or repeal legislation such as the antiterrorism law and cybercrime decree and work towards governance that prioritizes reconciliation and the rule of law. A robust international stance in support of free expression, cultural pluralism, and open civil society in Tunisia is all the more important in light of the upcoming presidential election in October 2024. Even as Saied’s government stacks the election in his favor, continued international pressure is essential for maintaining civic and cultural life in Tunisia, regardless of the outcome.

“That is why I support the revolution and, like so many of the young people, worry that it will be stolen from us by the traitors, thieves and killers who have ruled us for far too long.”¹⁶³ The same words that Riahi wrote in 2011 are more prescient than ever. Riahi said that he fears with democracy’s fall in Tunisia, “the assassination of the Arab Spring has finally taken place.” The book ban pushback, along with the steady stream of protests in response to arrests, indicates that this may not be a fait accompli, at least as far as the Tunisian people are concerned. The question is if the Tunisian government and its international partners are willing to work toward proving Riahi’s words were premature.

VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THE TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT

- Immediately release all those jailed for their peaceful expression, drop related charges, and end judicial harassment of dissidents.
- Revoke Decree Law 54 and refrain from putting forth vaguely worded decree laws or legislation that broadly criminalizes publishing or sharing information.
- Amend the anti-terrorism law of 2015 to strengthen protections for free expression and refrain from issuing laws that broadly increase the powers of the government in the name of security.
- Reform the penal code by rewording or removing entirely sections that criminalize insulting or defaming police or public officials, including Articles 67, 125 and 128, as well as other penalties that carve out broad exceptions to freedom of speech, including Article 91 of the military penal code.
- Allow civil society organizations to operate freely, and respect Decree 88 and the protections it affords civil society.
- Cease using government aligned media networks to incite against government critics, dissidents, political opponents, and members of marginalized groups.
- Promote and protect legislation that safeguards free expression, free assembly, free association, freedom of the press, and that protects the privacy of internet users.
- Respect freedom of expression and access to information before, during, and after presidential elections.

FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Press the Tunisian government to release all those jailed for peaceful expression.
- Prioritize the importance of free expression and civic space, including the importance of civil society to operate freely, in bilateral and multilateral meetings with Tunisian counterparts.
- Speak out against incitement and racist campaigns directed at vulnerable communities.
- Urge the government to reverse its crackdown on free expression and its arrests of government critics, which is prohibiting the country from conducting a free and fair presidential election.
- Suspend all assistance to the government institutions and security forces implementing the crackdown, including the ministries of interior and judiciary and the police, until it ends the crackdown and frees the prisoners of conscience.
- Do not whitewash the Tunisian government's human rights abuses by engaging with the government, such as migration and security partnerships, without including meaningful attention to human rights concerns.

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