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Freedom in the World 2010 - Tunisia

Capital: Tunis

Population: 10,429,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali easily won a fifth term in the tightly controlled October 2009 general elections, while the ruling party captured three-quarters of the seats in the lower house of parliament. Throughout the year, the authorities continued to harass, arrest, and imprison journalists and bloggers, human rights activists, and political opponents of the government.

Tunisia, which had been a French protectorate since 1881, gained its independence in 1956. The country was then ruled for more than 30 years by President Habib Bourguiba, a secular nationalist who favored economic and social modernization along Western lines but severely limited political liberties. Bourguiba succeeded in advancing women's rights and economic development, and his government maintained strong relations with the West and fellow Arab states.

In 1987, Prime Minister Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali ousted Bourguiba and seized the presidency in a bloodless coup. Ben Ali's rise to power had little effect on state policy. He continued to push market-based economic development and women's rights, but he also repressed political opponents. Independent journalists, secular activists, and Islamists faced imprisonment, torture, and harassment. The Islamists, particularly those in the banned movement Ennahda, were jailed following sham trials in the early 1990s.

Ben Ali's hold on government institutions remained strong, and he won a fifth five-year term in the October 2009 presidential election, taking nearly 90 percent of the vote amid tight media and candidacy restrictions. In the concurrent elections for the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the legislature, the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) captured 161 of 214 seats. Of the six other parties that won representation, none took more than 16 seats. The Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), one of the few critical independent parties, boycotted the 2009 election after it was barred from campaigning, meaning only three candidates qualified to challenge the incumbent.

The government's efforts to control the 2009 election process were evident in restrictions imposed on the media, retaliation against journalists and bloggers, and a concerted bid by official media to discredit critical coverage. Although this was the first Tunisian election in which all presidential candidates were given airtime to discuss their platforms, the authorities manipulated the scheduling and edited the speeches. The RCD monopolized prime-time advertising and campaigning, while independent journalists and commentators were arrested or assaulted, and their publications, broadcast outlets, and even blogs and web pages were blocked.

Some political prisoners have been freed in recent years, and Ben Ali has stated that the press and opposition should feel free to promote their ideas. However, the president's critics still face beatings and incarceration, and even political activists who are released from jail often have their movements monitored and restricted.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Tunisia is not an electoral democracy. President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali has exercised authoritarian rule since seizing power in a coup in 1987. Beginning in 1989, he won five consecutive five-year terms in tightly controlled elections, either running unopposed or easily defeating token challengers. A 2002 referendum removed the constitution's three-term limit for the presidency and raised the maximum age for presidential candidates from 70 to 75. A package of amendments in 2008 lowered the voting age from 20 to 18 and effectively barred presidential candidates other than the elected leaders of political parties who had served at least two years or those who obtained nominations from at least 30 lawmakers or local councillors. Both before and after the 2009 elections, the authorities cracked down on media outlets and human rights activists to minimize public expressions of dissent.

The president appoints the cabinet, the prime minister, regional governors, and the head of the official election-monitoring organization. Members of the 214-seat Chamber of Deputies are directly elected to serve five-year terms. Of the 126 members of Chamber of Advisors, the upper house of the legislature, 85 are indirectly elected by local officials and 41 are appointed by the president, all for six-year terms.

Opposition parties that are genuinely independent of state influence are weak and have almost no role in the formation of public policy. The state strictly monitors and severely curbs their activities. For example, according to Human Rights Watch, an edition of the Ettajdid party's weekly, *Ettarik al-Jadid*, was seized by officials on October 10, 2009, on the grounds that it published presidential candidate Ahmed Brahim's campaign platform before the official start of campaigning on October 11. However, the newly printed edition had not been scheduled to be distributed until that date.

Although Tunisia is considered less corrupt than several other Arab and African states, Ben Ali and his close relatives and associates have used their positions to create private monopolies in several sectors of the economy. Tunisia was ranked 65 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Tunisia has one of the worst media environments in the Arab world. Despite constitutional guarantees and a press law that promise freedom of expression, the government uses an array of legal, penal, and economic measures to silence dissenting voices. Libel and defamation are criminal offenses, and journalists also risk punishment under laws against disturbing public order. Only a handful of private television and radio stations have received licenses, including one owned by the president's son-in-law that was launched in 2009. Government-approved media regularly feature praise of Ben Ali and his associates, and criticism of the president is not tolerated.

Tunisian journalists in 2009 were detained, physically assaulted, fired from their jobs, prevented from leaving the country, and subjected to seemingly arbitrary police surveillance. More than 100 Tunisian journalists live in exile, according to Canadian Journalists for Free Expression. 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. Ahead of the 2009 elections, the Qatar-based satellite television station Al-Jazeera was the target of a smear campaign, and its Tunisia-based correspondent was denied accreditation.

Stations that operate without approval via satellite or internet broadcasts face severe repression. For example, in January 2009 the authorities shut down the independent radio station Kalima soon after it began broadcasting via satellite, arresting or detaining several of its employees and confiscating materials from its offices. In February, three journalists for the London-based satellite television station Al-Hiwar al-Tounissi were arrested and charged with working for an "illegal station," according to the Observatoire pour la Liberte de Presse, d'Edition et de Creation.

The government bans access to an array of internet sites dealing with topics like democracy and human rights, and opposition media websites are often defaced. Social-networking and video-sharing sites like Facebook and YouTube were intermittently blocked during 2009. Online journalists and bloggers are routinely monitored, harassed, and arrested. The Committee to Protect Journalists has ranked Tunisia among the 10 worst places to be a blogger.

Tunisia's state religion is Islam, but the small population of local Jews and Christians are generally free to practice their religions. The government closely monitors mosques for extremist activity. They receive state funding and may remain open only during prayer time; imams are appointed and paid by the state. "Sectarian" dress like the *hijab* (headscarf) is prohibited, and both men and women with conservative religious appearances face police harassment.

Authorities limit academic freedom. While academics may discuss sensitive topics with relative openness in private settings, the government does not allow such discussion in public forums. In July 2009, professor Khediya Arfaoui was sentenced to eight months in prison for spreading rumors on Facebook, though she remained free at year's end pending an appeal.

Freedoms of association and assembly are guaranteed in the constitution and in several international treaties to which Tunisia is a party, but the government restricts these rights in practice. Nongovernmental organizations are legally prohibited from pursuing political objectives and activities, and independent human rights groups are routinely denied registration, forcing them to operate precariously as illegal bodies. Public-funding requirements and foreign-funding reporting rules make it extremely difficult for registered associations to maintain independence from the government and benefit from foreign sponsorship. Rights activists are routinely harassed, slandered, and abused. In September 2009, for example, human rights lawyer Radhia Nasraoui and her husband were assaulted by plainclothes police following a critical interview with Al-Jazeera.

Recognized trade unions, including the only labor federation, the General Union of Tunisian Workers, are progovernment in orientation. Authorities limit independent labor activity, especially when it resembles or threatens to become organized political opposition. Progovernment forces orchestrated a virtual coup within the year-old National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists in mid-2009, taking over key leadership positions and endorsing Ben Ali's candidacy in the presidential election.

Despite constitutional guarantees, the judiciary lacks independence, and the executive branch controls the appointment and assignments of judges. Courts do not ensure due process in politically motivated cases and regularly issue convictions, including post-prison terms of "administrative control," or internal exile. Trials of suspected Islamists, human rights activists, and journalists are typically condemned as grossly unfair and politically biased by credible domestic and international observers. Prominent government critic and journalist Taoufik Ben Brik was sentenced in November 2009 to six months in prison following a trial in which his lawyers were prevented from fully presenting his case or cross-examining witnesses, according to Amnesty International. Human Rights Watch reports that other activists have been punished arbitrarily, including human rights defender Abdallah Zouari, who was released from internal exile

in August 2009, some two years after his original sentence ended. Even after his release, Zouari continued to be monitored and harassed, and was briefly arrested in September. Suspected Islamists have been subjected to harsh prison sentences and reported ill-treatment in prison. Detention facilities in general are plagued by overcrowding and lack of medical care, and credible local and international sources report that detainees are routinely tortured in prison and in police custody.

Tunisian authorities have been fairly progressive on social policy, especially in the area of women's rights. The country ratified the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in late 2008, and women in Tunisia enjoy more social freedoms and legal rights than their counterparts in other Arab countries. The personal status code grants women equal rights in divorce, and children born to Tunisian mothers and foreign fathers are automatically granted citizenship, which is not the case in many neighboring countries.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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