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Tunisia: President Saied must immediately stop his political ‘witch hunt’

Tunisian authorities are escalating efforts to crack down on high-profile critics and perceived opponents of President Kais Saied with the arrest of at least ten people in a week of political turmoil, Amnesty International said today.

President Saied has branded those arrested as “terrorists” and accused them of conspiring to undermine the state and manipulate food prices to foment social tension, in **videotaped remarks** posted on 14 February on his official Facebook page. They include political figures, lawyers, a former government minister, and the director of a leading radio station, according to lawyers and family members.

“Arresting people on vague claims of conspiracy flies in the face of basic human rights. This latest round of arrests is a deliberate attempt to quash dissent including criticism of the president,” said Heba Morayef, Amnesty International’s Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

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Heba Morayef, Amnesty International

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In at least three cases, the authorities have arrested people under a law that could carry the death penalty and, in at least five cases, the authorities failed to present evidence of wrongdoing by those arrested, according to lawyers. The grounds for other arrests remain unclear.

Lawyers and family members of five of those arrested described a series of early morning or evening raids on their homes by up to 20 anti-terrorism police. Some were denied access to a lawyer for at least 24 hours.

One high-profile arrest was that of Khayam Turki, a former member of the opposition Ettakatol party who now runs a local think-tank. In the early hours of 11 February, anti-terrorism police raided his home in Tunis and later interrogated him about his interactions with opposition politicians, foreigners, and what they described as a visit by foreign diplomats to his house, his lawyer told Amnesty International.

Others include Abdelhamid Jlassi, a former senior member of the opposition Ennahda party who has been openly critical of President Saied, and another Ennahda member, Nourredine Bhiri. Bhiri’s lawyers told Amnesty International he was arrested on accusations of “seeking to change the nature of the state” in connection with public remarks they attribute to him calling for resistance against dictatorship. Bhiri had previously been arbitrarily detained for almost 70 days in early 2022 before he was released without charge.

Security forces this week also arbitrarily arrested Lazhar Akremi, a well-known lawyer and political figure who has criticised the authorities in the media, and Nouredine Boutar, director of Radio Mosaïque, a popular station that has given voice to criticism of President Saied.

Boutar, his lawyer told Amnesty International, was questioned about his radio station’s editorial line. On 18 November 2022, the president **complained publicly** over the station’s coverage of him while speaking to a Radio Mosaïque reporter.

Amnesty International has reported extensively on President Saied's power grab of 25 July 2021. Since that time, the authorities have arrested, investigated or prosecuted at least 32 people in relation to their peaceful criticism of the authorities.

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