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| <b>Title</b>            | Freedom of the Press 2010 - Tunisia                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Publisher</b>        | Freedom House                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Country</b>          | Tunisia                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
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## Freedom of the Press 2010 - Tunisia

**Status:** Not Free

**Legal Environment:** 27

**Political Environment:** 33

**Economic Environment:** 25

**Total Score:** 85

| Survey Edition             | 2005  | 2006  | 2007  | 2008  | 2009   |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| <b>Total Score, Status</b> | 80,NF | 83,NF | 83,NF | 81,NF | 82, NF |

- The constitution and press code 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 violating these laws can result in imprisonment and fines, with offensive statements about the president carrying prison sentences of up to five years. Journalists also risk punishment under laws against disturbing public order. Tunisia does not have a freedom of information law.
- Government censorship is routine. In March 2009, the government encouraged a privately owned distribution company to deliver only two copies of a particular issue of the opposition Arabic-language weekly *Al-Mawkif* to each vendor. The issue included a petition signed by five female judges to protest against years of harassment and call for the enforcement of international standards in Tunisia's judiciary. The government used similar tactics to control distribution of February issues of the paper. *Al-Mawkif* also faces trial on defamation charges filed in 2008 by five companies involved in marketing cooking oil. According to human rights lawyers, the charges against the paper are politically motivated. Separately, the government banned a March issue of the United Arab Emirates weekly magazine *As-Sada* due to an article alleging that wealthy Tunisians have increasingly engaged in adultery since the prohibition of polygamy.
- 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.
- The National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) released its second report in May 2009, criticizing the state of media freedom in the country. The SNJT had previously angered the government by announcing in 2008 that it would not endorse President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in the October 2009 elections. After the union released its 2009 report, progovernment journalists began a campaign

against its executive board, threatening journalists who refused to sign their petition with loss of employment. Four board members with government allegiances resigned, triggering new elections for the union's leadership in September. However, the progovernment members called for an earlier extraordinary congress in August, at which a new leadership was elected from the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party. Following a court's official recognition of the new board members in September, plainclothes police surrounded the SNJT offices, removed staff members, and beat SNJT president Neji B'ghouri as he attempted to access the premises. B'ghouri's supporters challenged the new board in court, but the case was still pending at year's end.

- Journalists who cross the government's red lines face harassment, physical assault, arbitrary surveillance, dismissal from employment, and imprisonment. Interrogation and detention of members of the media remain commonplace, and the government has refused to renew journalists' passports on occasion. Since Ben Ali came to power in 1987, more than 100 Tunisian journalists have been forced into exile, according to the 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. 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. *Le Monde* correspondent Florence Beauge was denied entry into Tunisia in October due to the government's dislike of her allegedly aggressive position on the country.
- On October 28, Slim Boukhdhir of the newspaper *Al-Arabya* sustained serious injuries after he was attacked and stripped naked by unidentified men. Shortly afterward, Boukhdhir's house was surrounded by security forces who barred access to visitors for four days. Boukhdhir had participated in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation about Ben Ali's reelection, during which he discussed intimidation of the media, the use of criminal defamation laws, and issues related to Ben Ali's wife. Boukhdhir had spent several months in prison in 2008 due to his reporting.
- Omar Mestiri, a director of the private internet-based Radio Kalima, was attacked by unknown assailants in November 2009 while talking to his lawyer in the street. He was then pushed into a car, driven to an unknown location, and held for many hours before being released. Mestiri had been repeatedly threatened by the Tunisian police and others in the past.
- There are eight major dailies, including two owned by the government and two owned by the ruling party. *Al-Mawkiif*, the private opposition weekly, lacks state support and advertising revenue, and its journalists are frequently denied access to information and facilities. The Tunisia External Communication Agency allocates support to progovernment newspapers. 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. Many foreign satellite stations can be viewed in Tunisia, although the government has been known to block transmissions from time to time.
- Approximately 34 percent of Tunisians used the internet in 2009. Internet cafes are state run and operate under police surveillance, and users must register their names and other personal information before accessing the internet. Opposition, social-networking, and video-sharing sites are routinely blocked by the government. In October, the French-hosted website of the online magazine *Kalima* was hacked, destroying eight years of archives.

- 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. In October 2009, journalist and blogger Zied el-Heni was strip-searched by authorities and his documents were confiscated upon his return from an International Federation of Journalists conference in Jordan. Several days later, el-Heni was beaten by unidentified assailants, and his blog was subsequently closed down by officials. In November, blogger Fatma Riahi, better known as Arabicca, was summoned for several days of police questioning. Police also searched her home, confiscating her computer and requesting access to her social-networking accounts. Arabicca's blog was blocked three days before her arrest and has been frequently monitored by the government.

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