

Tunisia: Harsh Sentences in ‘Conspiracy Case’ Sham Trial

Quash Unfair Proceedings; End Abusive Mass Prosecutions



[Click to expand Image](#)

Several of the people tried and convicted in the “Conspiracy Case” on April 19, 2025, in Tunis, Tunisia. Top row (L-R): Nouredine Bhiri, Khayam Turki, Abdelhamid Jelassi, Ghazi Chaouachi, and Lazhar Akremi. Bottom row (L-R): Ridha Belhaj, Issam Chebbi, Chaima Issa, Jaouhar Ben Mbarek and Said Ferjani. © Private

(Beirut) – A [Tunisian](#) court on April 19, 2025, [sentenced](#) 37 defendants to between 4 and 66 years in prison in the politically motivated “Conspiracy Case,” Human Rights Watch said today. The Tunis Court of First Instance issued the sentences after just three sessions in the mass trial, without providing the defendants with an adequate opportunity to present their defenses and without other due process protections.

On May 2, 2024, a Tunis prosecutor [alleged](#) that lawyers, political opponents, activists, researchers, and businessmen were plotting to overthrow President Kais Saied by destabilizing the country, and even of plotting to assassinate him. Forty defendants were charged and referred for trial under numerous articles of Tunisia’s Penal Code and 2015 Counterterrorism Law, including some that carry the death penalty. The court [began](#) the trial on March 4. Sentences were handed down against 37 defendants, while the remaining three have complaints pending with the Court of Cassation.

“The Tunisian court did not give defendants so much as a semblance of a fair trial, sentencing them to long terms after a mass trial in which they could not adequately present their case,” said [Bassam Khawaja](#), deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The Tunisian authorities are making it clear that anyone participating in political opposition or civic activism risks years in prison after a hasty trial without due process.”

According to the judgment, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, the court [sentenced](#) the former justice minister and senior Ennahda opposition party leader Nouredine Bhiri to 43 years in prison; the businessman Kamel Ltaief to 66 years; and the opposition politician Khayam Turki to 48 years. Prominent opposition figures Ghazi Chaouachi, Issam Chebbi, Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Ridha Belhaj, and Chaima Issa were each sentenced to 18 years. Abdelhamid Jelassi, a political activist and former Ennahda party member, and Said Ferjani, a former Ennahda parliament member, were sentenced to 13 years; and Lazhar Akremi, a lawyer and former minister, was sentenced to 8 years. The court sentenced another 15 defendants, including the exiled feminist activist Bochra Belhaj Hamida, to 28 years in prison.

Most defendants are not in custody, and some are outside the country and were tried in absentia. At least 12 were arrested in February 2023, and 8 remained in detention as of January 2025. Some of the defendants had been in abusive pretrial [detention](#) for more than two years, beyond the maximum permitted under Tunisian law.

Tunisian authorities have taken additional steps in this case to undermine the right to a fair trial. On February 26, ahead of the first session, the trial court's president and its prosecutor ordered the detained defendants to [appear by videoconference](#), claiming a "real danger." Trial by video is inherently abusive as it undermines detainees' right to be brought physically before a judge to assess their well-being and the legality and conditions of their detention.

In subsequent sessions, the court barred journalists and trial observers, including Human Rights Watch, from entering the courtroom. One defendant, Chaima Issa, was not permitted to enter the courtroom to attend her own trial for the April 11 session.

On April 21, agents of the antiterrorist unit of the National Guard [arrested](#) a lawyer in the case, Ahmed Souab, in his home, after he issued statements to the media about the verdict. He was placed in custody under the 2015 counterterrorism law and is [accused](#) of "terrorist and common law offenses," including "threatening to commit terrorist acts with the aim of compelling a person to do or refrain from doing an act and exposing a protected person's life to danger."

Other defense lawyers in Tunisia have been [subjected](#) to increasing judicial harassment and criminal prosecution for the legitimate exercise of their profession. Ayachi Hammami, previously a defense lawyer in the case, was added as a defendant in [May 2023](#), and was sentenced to eight years in prison.

The Tunisian government has been using arbitrary detention and politically motivated prosecutions to intimidate, punish, and silence critics, Human Rights Watch said. Following President Saied's [takeover](#) of Tunisia's state institutions on July 25, 2021, the authorities have dramatically intensified their repression of dissent. Since early 2023, they have [stepped up](#) arbitrary arrests and detention of people across the political spectrum who were perceived as critical of the government. The authorities' repeated [attacks on the judiciary](#), including Saied's dismantling of the High Judicial Council, have severely undermined its independence and jeopardized Tunisians' right to a fair trial.

Tunisia is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which guarantee the right to freedom of expression and assembly, to a fair trial, and to not be subject to arbitrary arrest or detention.

Tunisian authorities should overturn these convictions, guarantee fair trials, and stop prosecuting individuals for exercising their human rights, Human Rights Watch said. Tunisia's international partners should break their silence and urge the government to end its crackdown and to protect space for freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.

"The sham 'Conspiracy Case' trial reflects the depths to which President Kais Saied's government will go to eliminate the last vestiges of political opposition and free speech in the country," Khawaja said. "Concerned governments need to speak out or Tunisian authorities will continue to pursue manufactured and abusive prosecutions while failing to address the country's economic crises."