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Freedom in the World 2011 - Tunisia

Capital: Tunis

Population: 10,429,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

A state-run media campaign in 2010 called for constitutional amendments that would lift the age limit on presidential candidates, allowing President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali to run for a sixth term in 2014. Throughout the year, the authorities continued to harass, arrest, and imprison journalists and bloggers, human rights activists, and political opponents of the government, and a law passed in June imposed new criminal restrictions on opposition activity. Antigovernment demonstrations broke out in late December, sparked by the self-immolation of a fruit vendor protesting police harassment.

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. Many Islamists, particularly supporters of 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 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 elections after it was barred from campaigning.

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 the presidential campaign was the first in Tunisia in which all candidates received 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 websites were blocked.

The government's repressive measures continued in 2010. In June, the parliament passed a law that criminalized opposition activities deemed to be fomented by "agents of a foreign power." The measure followed meetings in May 2010 between Tunisian human rights activists and European lawmakers.

Also during 2010, a state media campaign continued to advocate constitutional amendments that would allow Ben Ali to run for a sixth term in 2014, but the changes had not been passed by year's end. Existing constitutional rules require presidential candidates to be younger than 75, and Ben Ali turned 74 in September 2010. At the conclusion of a sixth term, he would be 83; Ben Ali had ousted Bourguiba, then 84, on the grounds that he was too old and infirm to rule effectively. Meanwhile, Ben Ali's choice of successor remained unclear. Reputed candidates included his son-in-law, Mohamed Sakher el-Materi, and the secretary general of the RCD, Mohamed Ghariani.

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 councilors.

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. A 2002 constitutional amendment created an upper house, the Chamber of Counselors. Of its 126 members, 85 are indirectly elected by local officials and 41 are appointed by the president, all for six-year terms. A cabinet reshuffle took place in January 2010, but Mohamed Ghannouchi, a technocratic economist, remained in place as the long-standing prime minister.

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. In July 2010, for example, the authorities continued their 13-year campaign of repression against the party newspaper of the PDP, *Al-Mawkef*, by invalidating the lease for its Tunis office.

Ben Ali and his close relatives and associates used their positions to create private monopolies in several sectors of the economy. Tunisia was ranked 59 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Tunisia has one of the worst media environments in the 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 featured praise of Ben Ali and his associates in 2010, and criticism of the president was not tolerated.

Tunisian journalists are 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. In July 2010, television journalist Fahem Boukadous began serving a four-year prison term for threatening public order through his coverage of labor protests in 2008. He appealed the sentence to the Supreme Court, and expressed concern that his acute respiratory ailment would worsen in prison. Boukadous remained behind bars at year's end.

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. The next month, 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 Observatory for Freedom of Press, Publishing, and 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 are intermittently blocked. 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. In October 2010, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) criticized the blocking of the website of the Tunisian Observatory for Union Rights and Freedoms shortly after it was launched.

Tunisia's state religion is Islam, but the small population of Jews and Christians are generally free to practice their faiths. 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.

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. In late December 2010, antigovernment demonstrations erupted in the underdeveloped towns of the interior after fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself to death to protest police harassment. The suicide became a symbol for wider political despair and economic dislocation. The unrest quickly spread to larger coastal cities, and while the police attempted to crack down, the military had generally declined to intervene by year's end.

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 regularly harassed, slandered, and abused.

Government-sanctioned trade unions, including the only labor federation, the General Union of Tunisian Workers, support government policies. 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.

The judicial system in Tunisia is carefully managed by the executive branch, which controls the appointment and assignment of judges. Beginning in 2005, the executive bureau of the Association of Tunisian Judges faced a campaign of harassment and dismissals, resulting in a changed membership that is allegedly more cooperative with the regime. A wide-ranging coalition of human rights organizations issued a statement in November 2010 to condemn the assault on judicial autonomy.

Courts do not ensure due process in politically motivated cases and regularly subject the defendants to harsh sentences, including terms of "administrative control," or internal exile, after release from prison. Trials of suspected Islamists, human rights activists, and journalists are typically condemned as grossly unfair and politically biased by domestic and international observers. Detention facilities in general are plagued by overcrowding and lack of medical care, and credible local and international sources report that detainees are often tortured in prison and in police custody.

Tunisia has long been praised for relatively progressive social policies, especially in the areas of family law and women's rights. The country ratified the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in late 2008, and women in Tunisia enjoy more social freedoms and legal rights than in most other countries in the region. The personal status code grants women equal rights in divorce, and children born to Tunisian mothers and foreign fathers are automatically granted citizenship. The country legalized medical abortion in 1973.

** 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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