



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 9

**Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up to and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action**

### **Joint written statement submitted by Regroupement des Jeunes Africains pour la Démocratie et le Développement - Section Togo, Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status\***

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1 June 2026]

### **Silencing Tunisia: Crackdown on Dissent, Media and Civil Society**

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\*Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

Regroupement des Jeunes Africains pour la Démocratie et le Développement and the Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience is providing this submission regarding the situation in Tunisia. Rached Ghannouchi, Said Ferjani, Ghazi Chaouachi, Chaima Issa, Noureddine Bhiri, Bechir Akremi, Issam Chebbi, Ridha Belhaj, Khayam Turki, Ajmi Lourimi, Abdelhamid Jelassi, Nejjib Chebbi, Jawhar Ben Mbarek, Ayachi Hammami, Zied Heni, Riadh Bettaieb, Ali Larayedh, and many others have been particularly impacted, as their fundamental rights are being violated by Tunisian authorities.

Since 2021, Tunisia has been undergoing an erosion of democracy, marked by “a series of steps widely regarded as unconstitutional” and the progressive establishment of an authoritarian regime. On 25 July 2021, Kaïs Saïed who had been democratically elected in 2019, invoked Article 80 of the Constitution to dismiss the Head of Government, suspend Parliament, and govern by decree, thereby circumventing democratic institutions. In 2022, this seizure of power was consolidated by the adoption of a new Constitution, drafted unilaterally and approved by a referendum with only 30% participation, establishing a regime that dismantles institutional checks and balances. In the same year, Kaïs Saïed also dissolved Parliament and issued a presidential decree granting himself the power to dismiss judges. Since early 2023, the authorities have also notably intensified the arbitrary arrest and detention of individuals perceived as critical of the government, turning arbitrary detention into a cornerstone of Tunisia’s repressive policy.

In the years that followed, this trend has been compounded by the instrumentalisation of the judicial system to target political opponents, the use of repressive laws to limit criticism and restrictions on both civil society and media freedom. As of May 2026, judicial repression of dissent, free speech and the crackdown on civil society persist in a deeply troubling pattern.

#### Arbitrary Detention and Mass Convictions of Political Opponents

In October 2024, during his swearing-in ceremony for a second five-year term, after securing a reported 90.69 per cent of the vote, Kaïs Saïed declared that “there is no place for traitors”. He has consistently used such rhetoric to characterise his opponents and to justify authoritarian measures, asserting that those responsible are the ones who “betrayed” the nation.

In the mass trial known as the “Conspiracy Case”, lawyers, political opponents, activists, and researchers were charged under numerous provisions of Tunisia’s Penal Code and the 2015 Counter-terrorism Law for allegedly plotting to overthrow the President. In April 2025, the Tunis Court of First Instance sentenced 37 defendants to terms ranging from four to 66 years for “conspiracy against state security” and “belonging to a terrorist group”. Human Rights Watch, having reviewed the documents in the case, found the charges to be unfounded and unsupported by credible evidence. In November 2025, these sentences were upheld in proceedings widely described as a sham trial, “marred by a litany of fair trial rights violations”.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, described these sentences as “a setback to justice and rule of law” and called on Tunisia to refrain “from using broad national security and counter terrorism legislation to silence dissidents”. Kaïs Saïed, however, dismissed all criticism, referring to it as “interference in our affairs”.

Concurrently, since December 2022, at least 17 current and former members of the opposition party Ennahda have reportedly been arrested in the case known as “Conspiracy Case 2”. Rached Ghannouchi, former leader of the opposition has been arbitrarily detained since April 2023 on charges of “conspiracy against the internal security of the state”. On 2 February 2026, a Tunis appeals court upheld sentences ranging from three to 35 years against at least 20 opposition figures, including Rached Ghannouchi, with his prison term now exceeding 60 years. Amnesty International has highlighted that the wave of

prosecutions “show how Tunisia’s justice system is being instrumentalized by the authorities to crush all forms of political opposition and silence peaceful dissent”.

In this regard, in the case of Ghannouchi and Others v Republic of Tunisia, the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights issued provisional measures to guarantee the protection of the opponents currently detained. The Court ordered Tunisia “to take all measures to eliminate all barriers’ between the detainees and their families and lawyers and to have access to and communicate with lawyers and doctors of their choice” and “to furnish the detainees and their families and lawyers ‘with adequate information and facts relating to the legal and factual basis’ for their detention”. On 17 March 2025, following Tunisia’s request to revoke these provisional measures, the African Court rejected the application in the pending case, holding that they must be implemented by Tunisian authorities.

#### Crackdown On the Civil Society and Media

Over the course of his mandate, Kaïs Saïed has repeatedly threatened civil society actors with dissolution and subjected them to judicial and administrative harassment, however, the crackdown has now reached an unprecedented level. Court orders, mainly targeting organisations working on human rights, migrants, corruption, media freedom and social justice are issued to suspend their activities, alleging concerns relating to “suspicious” foreign funding and the protection of “national interests”.

On 25 April 2026, Tunisian authorities ordered a one-month suspension of the Tunisian League for Human Rights. Similarly, on 5 May 2026, Avocats Sans Frontières, which promotes access to justice and defends human rights was suspended for 30 days. Such measures constitute serious attacks on the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, which may only be restricted where lawful, necessary, proportionate, and strictly limited to legitimate aims in a democratic society, a threshold that these measures fail to meet.

The ongoing crackdown also extends to the media sphere, with Tunisian authorities intensifying their offensive against the independent press. In 2026, Reporters without Borders ranked Tunisia 137th out of 180 countries in its annual index. Since the introduction in 2022 of Decree 54, a cybercrime law enacted by Kaïs Saïed, authorities invoked its board and vague provisions to criminalise the act of producing, spreading, disseminating, sending or writing false news “with the aim of infringing the rights of others, harming public safety or national defense or sowing terror among the population”.

In addition to Decree 54, authorities now resort to unrelated financial criminal charges to further silence and restrict journalists. Radio journalists Mourad Zeghid and Borhen Bsaies, initially sentenced under Decree 54 to 8 months imprisonment where thereafter prosecuted for “money laundering” and “tax evasion” without any credible evidence. On 12 May 2026, their 3-year sentence was upheld by the Court of Appeal. As emphasised by the Committee to protect Journalists these tactics reveal a broader strategy aimed at “dismantling the infrastructure that allows independent journalism to survive”.

On 7 May 2026, recalling that twenty-eight journalists, had been tried and sentenced last year to various prison terms for conduct linked to their professional activities, under broadly worded provisions, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk urged Tunisian authorities to lift all arbitrary restrictions on the freedoms of expression.

In light of the alarming escalation of the situation, the representatives of detained Tunisian opposition leaders call on UN member states to urge Tunisia to end all restrictions on fundamental rights, in particular, the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as guaranteed under international legal instrument and binding on Tunisia. They further call on Tunisian authorities to immediately release all political prisoners who are arbitrarily detained.

