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Tunisia: Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders

In the lead-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections due to take place in October 2009, Amnesty International is concerned about the increasing incidents of intimidation, harassment and acts of brutality against those expressing views critical of the Tunisian government. Against a backdrop of intensification in the past month of repression against human rights defenders, including lawyers and journalists, by state security officers, Amnesty International stresses that freedoms of expression, association and assembly are the pre-requisites for the free debate which is indispensable in pre-election period and that the poor human rights record of Tunisia should not be a taboo subject. Amnesty International is calling on the Tunisian authorities to end the harassment of and attacks on human rights defenders and to allow a free debate on the human rights situation in the country.

Human rights defenders in Tunisia face diverse forms of harassment by state authorities, including stalking and intensive surveillance of their offices and homes, as well as interference with and blocking of telephone lines, internet access and email communication. Local members of human rights organizations have also undergone blatant surveillance by state security officers, in their efforts to deter and intimidate members and supporters, as well as victims of human rights abuses who may wish to contact these organizations. Lawyers denouncing human rights violations have also been targeted. They are closely monitored, intimidated and harassed. Their clients or potential clients can be intimidated by state security officials and pressured to change lawyers. Smear campaigns in the state-controlled media are organized to denigrate human rights defenders and to tarnish their reputation. Independent human rights and other civil society organizations are denied registration or face politically motivated legal proceedings which virtually paralyse all their activities.

In the past weeks, the crackdown against human rights defenders seems to have increased.

On 1 July 2009, Lotfi Amdouni, member of Amnesty International Tunisia and of the International Association for the Assistance of Political Prisoners (AISPP), was prevented from leaving his house on two occasions. The five state security officers around his home told him they were following orders to prevent him from participating in the next Amnesty International Tunisia's Annual General Meeting (AGM). They warned him not to attempt to leave his house. During the past week, the house of Lotfi Amdouni has been under overt surveillance and members of his family have been intimidated and questioned about his activities. He, along with a number of other members, was subsequently prevented from attending Amnesty International Tunisia's AGM, which took place on 4-5 July 2009.

Since his return to Tunisia after a trip to France and Belgium in June 2009, at the invitation of Amnesty International, where he met with officials and the press to denounce the human rights situation in Tunisia, Mohamed Abbou has been subjected to a smear campaign in the Tunisian press.

On 23 June 2009, human rights defenders and lawyers Radhia Nasraoui, Abdelraouf Ayadi and Abdelwahed Maatar were assaulted by Tunisian state security forces upon their return from a conference in Geneva of Tunisian exiles, where they denounced human rights violations in Tunisia. They were ordered to undergo a full body search as well as a search of all their luggage, including documents. Abdelraouf Ayadi, 59, was pushed, beaten and kicked, after he fell on the floor, by state security forces, before being lifted from the floor by four officers who brought him into an office to

search him and his belongings. After the assault, Abdelraouf Ayadi's clothes were torn and his knee was bleeding. A state security officer twisted Radhia Nasraoui's arm when she called her husband and knocked her mobile phone to the ground – her briefcase, which contained her laptop, was also thrown to the ground. Abdelwahed Maatar was verbally abused by four state security forces at Sfax airport, hit in the face (breaking his glasses in two) and held for two hours when he refused to let the state security forces body search him.

Human rights lawyer Radhia Nasraoui has been the target of a campaign of intimidation in the past few months. She was body searched and insulted at the airport, when returning from a trip to Paris on 19 May 2008. Her house was visited by state security officers in the night of 24 April and house, car and office keys were stolen, while she was in Kampala participating in the All-Africa Human Rights Defenders Conference. She filed a complaint but has not heard anything since.

Another human rights defender, Ammar Amroussia, was assaulted by six state security officers in the city of Gafsa on 15 May 2009, when he met the wife of prisoner of conscience Adnan Hajji (unfairly imprisoned for leading the unrest in the Gafsa region last year). Later on 21 May, he was violently prevented from meeting Radhia Nasraoui, his lawyer, in Gafsa.

At the launch of a report critical of press freedom by the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists (Syndicat national des journalistes tunisiens, SNJT) on 4 May 2009, journalists, known to be pro-government, interrupted the press conference. Three members of the syndicate's board, close to the government, resigned to trigger new board elections and issued a petition, reportedly backed by the Ministry of Communications, calling for the withdrawal of confidence in the board and for an extraordinary meeting to elect a new board. Members of the syndicate have been subjected to pressure and intimidation to sign the petition, some have been threatened with dismissal and a smear campaign is being carried out against the syndicate board members.

As far back as January 2009, the Tunisian authorities were cracking down on dissent, closing down the independent Kalima Radio. On 27 January 2009, police officers in plainclothes surrounded the office of Kalima Radio, which had started to broadcast via satellite the previous day. After three days of blockades, the radio premises were closed and sealed and all material seized. The blockade saw a number of incidents of intimidation and harassment. Human rights defender and editor-in-chief of Kalima Radio, Sihem Ben Sedrine, is the subject of an investigation for having provided telecommunication services without prior authorization.

All these events are part of a pattern of human rights violations against defenders, including lawyers, journalists and other activists who dare to disagree with the political status quo, and who denounce human rights violations occurring in Tunisia. In June 2009, while human rights defenders and lawyer Mohamed Abbou was finally allowed to travel abroad after almost two years of repeated refusals, the Tunisian authorities have denied impeding human rights defenders' activities through intimidation and repression, affirming to AFP that human rights defenders, members of all political parties and associations fully enjoy their rights and carry out their activities without the smallest hindrance, and can move and express their views freely.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned that despite such public declarations, the intimidation, harassment and repression of dissent is increasing in the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections and aims at silencing critical voices.

Amnesty International calls on the Tunisian authorities to uphold their obligations under Article 8 of the Tunisian Constitution and Articles 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Tunisia is a state party, which guarantee the right to freedom of expression, assembly and association respectively, and urges the Tunisian authorities to immediately end its repression of dissent and its intimidation, harassment and brutality against human rights defenders.

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