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Tunisian officials' rhetoric undermines human rights

Amnesty International has written to the Tunisian Minister of Human Rights to express its alarm at statements the Minister made about homosexuality in a television interview earlier this month.

In a letter of 23 February, the organization urged Samir Dilou, Minister of Human Rights and Transitional Justice to retract comments made on 4 February in which he said homosexuality was not a human right and was a perversion that needed to be treated medically.

Speaking in response to questions regarding a new gay magazine in Tunisia, Samir Dilou also said that “freedom of expression has limits. They [gay, lesbian and bisexual people] must respect the red lines that are defined by our culture, religion and heritage.”

“These comments are extremely disappointing, especially coming from the very person who should be ensuring that the human rights of all Tunisians are protected,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“These are not just words. Condoning discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity is a blank check for the most serious human rights violations.”

“The Minister must retract his statements and speak up in defence of the human rights of all Tunisians.”

In its letter Amnesty International points out that homosexuality stopped being seen as an illness or a ‘perversion’ by world medical organizations and associations decades ago.

The World Health Organisation officially removed ‘homosexuality’ from its International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems in 1990, whilst the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders removed it in 1973.

Studies have shown that homophobic comments by leaders and government have a trickle-down effect, and can encourage people to think that it is acceptable to discriminate, intimidate and target lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

The organization said that this was the latest of a number of statements by members of Tunisia’s new political elite in recent months that undermined human rights.

On 23 January Sadok Chourou, a member of parliament in the Ennahda party – which has the most seats in the National Constituent Assembly – gave a speech in Parliament in which he justified the use of violence against protesters. He argued that religious text allow for those who “corrupt the earth” to be killed, crucified or their hands and feet cut off.

On 9 November last year Suad Abderrahim, also an Ennahda member of parliament, said in a radio interview that single mothers should not be supported by the state because their behaviour did not fit

Tunisian culture and should not be encouraged.

The letter comes as the Tunisian authorities faces increasing pressure to show leadership on human rights.

In mid-February, the visit to Tunisia of Wajdi Ghoneim, a prominent Egyptian cleric known for his support of female genital mutilation (FGM), stirred wide-spread controversy and prompted the Tunisian Ministry of Women to publicly denounce the practice.

"We welcome the fact a minister has spoken out strongly against the practice of FGM," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. "However, such statements are undone by others condoning human rights violations."

"By using this kind of language and tone to describe vulnerable or marginalised groups and protesters, members of the Tunisian political elite are undermining human rights and effectively paving way for its abuse."

"The Tunisian authorities need to show real leadership rather than merely paying lip service to human rights."