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## **Tunisia: Persepolis trial verdict signals ‘erosion’ of free speech**

A Tunis court’s decision to fine a TV boss for “spreading information which can disturb the public order” after he screened an animated French movie is a sign of the continuing erosion of free speech in Tunisia, Amnesty International said.

Nabil Karoui was fined 2,400 Tunisian Dinar (\$1,500) after his station broadcast the animated French film *Persepolis* dubbed into Tunisian Arabic dialect in October 2011. The film was criticized for being blasphemous because of a scene showing a representation of God. Karoui’s lawyers have confirmed that he will be appealing the verdict.

“On a day that is meant to celebrate world press freedom, Tunisia has shown its failure to respect the basic right of freedom of expression. Nabil Karoui should not have been tried to begin with, let alone found guilty for exercising his right to peacefully express his views”, said Ann Harrison, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa programme.

Two others have also been found guilty of participating in the crime: Nadia Jamal, head of the organization that dubbed the movie into Tunisian dialect, and Alhadi Boughanim, responsible for monitoring programs. Both have also been fined.

Others have been found guilty previously on similar charges. For example, the editor of Arabic daily *Attounissia* was found guilty of ‘spreading information which can disturb the public order’ on 8 March 2012 and fined 1000 Tunisian Dinar (\$US 650). The daily had published a photograph of a German-Tunisian football player and his girlfriend who appears naked with his hand covering her breasts.

“While protecting public morals or public order may sometimes be a legitimate reason for restricting freedom of expression, such restrictions may only be imposed if absolutely necessary. This is clearly not the situation in these cases – people should not be convicted and sentenced for their views, even if these views are seen as controversial or offensive,” said Ann Harrison.

The convictions come amid growing complaints against what is seen as the government’s lack of will to implement freedom of the press and other media.

Journalists and activists have criticized the government for not enforcing new press and audiovisual laws passed in November 2011 which amend repressive provisions found in the old Press Law.

Instead they are resorting to articles in the Penal Code such as “spreading information that disturbs the public order” to prosecute journalists and others for peacefully expressing their opinions. The failure to implement the new laws is widely regarded as an attempt by the government to control and restrict the media.

A report issued by the National Committee of Information and Communication Reform last month highlights the problems that continue to face the media sector and the need for reform.

“At a time when Tunisia should be leading the way by showing its commitment to free and open debate and setting an example in its respect for human rights, it is disappointing to see the authorities resorting to these tactics to repress freedom of expression,” said Ann Harrison.