

URGENT ACTION

UNJUSTLY JAILED LAWYER TREATED INHUMANELY

Tunisian lawyer and media personality Sonia Dahmani has been arbitrarily detained since security forces arrested her from the Tunisian Bar Associations' office in Tunis on 11 May 2024. She is facing five separate legal proceedings, all stemming from the exercise of her right to freedom of expression. Sonia Dahmani is currently held in the Manouba prison in cruel and inhuman conditions including exposure to extreme cold and lack of access to basic necessities. The Tunisian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Sonia Dahmani, quash her unjust convictions and drop the baseless criminal investigations against her.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

President of the Republic Kais Saied
Route de la Goulette
Site archéologique de Carthage, Tunisie
Email: contact@carthage.tn
Twitter: @TnPresidency

Your Excellency,

I write to you to express my grave concern over the prolonged unjust imprisonment of Tunisian lawyer Sonia Dahmani. She is imprisoned for exercising her right to freedom of expression including publicly criticising conditions of detention in Tunisian prisons as well as the ill-treatment of refugees and migrants in the country.

Following her public comments during her regular appearances on television and radio shows, Tunisian authorities have initiated five separate legal proceedings against her. She was convicted and sentenced to imprisonment in two cases. On 6 July 2024, the Tunis Court of First Instance sentenced Sonia Dahmani to a year in prison, reduced to eight months on appeal, for making an ironic comment during a TV show. On 24 October 2024, the same court sentenced her to an additional two years in prison in a separate case for highlighting racist and discriminatory practices in Tunisia. Both convictions were based on the draconian Decree-Law 2022-54 on Cybercrimes. Sonia Dahmani has three other pending cases, all relating to the exercise of her right to freedom of expression.

Sonia Dahmani is enduring cruel and inhuman conditions of detention in prison. She faces extreme temperature fluctuations, with freezing cold during the winter due to a broken window. Prison authorities refuse to allow her family to bring warm clothing or food, leading to malnutrition and significant weight loss. She has developed serious health issues, including diabetes, back pain, swelling in the legs and high blood pressure. Sonia Dahmani is also denied basic necessities and adequate healthcare like clean clothing and medication, while being subjected to humiliating treatment by prison guards. For instance, on 20 August 2024, ahead of her trial hearing, authorities subjected her to a humiliating body search and forced nudity, in violation of her physical and psychological integrity. Sonia Dahmani shares her cell with four other detainees, including toilet facilities with no privacy. Hygiene is very poor, with limited access to hot water and an infestation of rats and insects in her cell.

I urge you to immediately and unconditionally release Sonia Dahmani, quash her unjust convictions and sentences and drop the baseless criminal investigations against her. Pending her release, she must be granted access to her family, lawyers and adequate healthcare and held in conditions that meet international standards for the treatment of prisoners.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Sonia Dahmani is a 59-year-old Tunisian lawyer and prominent media personality who frequently appeared on radio and TV shows such as “Emission Impossible” on IFM Radio and “Denya Zida” on Carthage+. Sonia Dahmani is facing five separate legal proceedings for public comments critical of the authorities. In November 2023, she was [summoned](#) by an investigative judge following a complaint by the General Directorate of Prisons after she made critical remarks about detention conditions in prisons during a radio show. In a separate case, she was [summoned](#) by an investigative judge in January 2024 following a [complaint](#) by Minister of Justice Laila Jaffel for criticizing the Tunisian authorities and stating that “putting people in prison is not an accomplishment”.

On 7 May 2024, Sonia Dahmani made critical comments of the migration situation in Tunisia during a TV show. She said: “What extraordinary country are we talking about? The one where half of young people want to leave?” On 9 May, she announced that she had been summoned by an investigative judge. She is being investigated under Article 24 Decree-Law 2022-54 which imposes five years’ imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 Tunisian Dinars (around 16,000 USD) for using telecommunications networks to produce, send, or disseminate “fake news,” “false data,” “false rumours,” or “fake, falsified, or falsely attributed documents to harm, defame, or incite violence against others, or to undermine public safety or national defence, spread fear, or incite hatred”. The penalties are doubled if the subject of the “false news” is a public official. On 11 May 2024, masked members of the security forces in plain clothes stormed the Tunisian Bar Association’s office in Tunis to arrest her.

The proceedings against Sonia Dahmani are taking place against the backdrop of an intensifying crackdown on freedom of expression. On 13 May 2024, the legal representatives of two private radio stations and one TV channel, namely IFM, Diwan FM and Carthage+ were all summoned by judicial authorities for questioning and according to their lawyers were asked about the work of their journalists and other general questions. After Sonia Dahmani’s arrest, the National Order of Lawyers (ONAT), Tunisia’s Bar Association, announced a [strike](#) on 13 May 2024 to protest against the arbitrary arrest of their colleague. The [French authorities](#) and the [European Union](#) have expressed their concerns regarding the wave of arrests targeting members of civil society organizations and journalists, including Sonia Dahmani.

On 22 May 2024, 11 days after their arrest, the Tunis First Instance Court sentenced Borhen Bsaies and Mourad Zeghidi, both prominent journalists, to a firm one year in prison under Article 24 of [Decree-Law 2022-54](#) for “intentionally using communication systems to produce and promote false news with the intent to infringe on the rights of others, harm public security or national defence, or spread terror among the population”. On 30 July 2024, the Tunis Court of Appeals reduced their sentences to eight months in prison.

Since the promulgation of [Decree-Law 54](#) on 13 September 2022, authorities have ramped up their targeting of individuals exercising their right to freedom of expression. At least 22 individuals, including lawyers, journalists, bloggers and political activists, were summoned for questioning, prosecuted or sentenced in relation to public comments perceived as critical of the authorities, including at least 13 on the basis of the [Decree-Law 2022-54](#) and in most cases following governmental complaints. Decree-Law 2022-54 contravenes human rights treaties including the provisions of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Tunisia is a state party. Both Article 9 of the Charter and Article 19 of the Covenant guarantee the right to freedom of expression. Restrictions on the right based on ambiguous, overly broad terms such as “fake news” and other repressive provisions of the cybercrime law fail to meet the requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality.

Since his power grab on 25 July 2021, President Saied has claimed emergency powers, claiming these were granted to him by Tunisia’s 2014 Constitution. Since February 2023, the human rights situation in Tunisia has been rapidly [deteriorating](#) as several opposition figures, dissidents, perceived enemies of the president and critics of the government have been targeted and harassed. The crackdown on opposition and critics is a flagrant attack on the rule of law and human rights including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in Tunisia, rights protected under Articles 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Articles 9, 10 and 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Arabic, French and English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 16 June 2025.

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Sonia Dahmani (she/her).

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/8054/2024/en/>.